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# The Primary Source: Issues in the Usability of Genealogical Records

Patrick O'Daniel

*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Patrick O'Daniel entitled "The Primary Source: Issues in the Usability of Genealogical Records." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Information Sciences.

William C. Robinson, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Jinx Watson, Aaron Purcell, Bharat Mehra

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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THE PRIMARY SOURCE:  
ISSUES IN THE USABILITY OF GENEALOGICAL RECORDS

A Thesis  
Presented for the  
Master of Science  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Patrick O'Daniel  
December 2007

## DEDICATION

For Kathy and Kelly

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee Dr. Bharat Mehra, Dr. Jinx Watson, Dr. Aaron Purcell, and Dr. Bill Robinson for their guidance. In addition, I would like to thank my co-workers at in History/Social Sciences Department of the Memphis Public Library and Information Center and the kind people who volunteered to take part in my study for their help and support.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines genealogists' information needs and discusses how librarians can accommodate them by providing access to essential primary sources as well as making those materials user-friendly. It includes a review of relevant literature and the results of a survey of experienced genealogists that shed light on the information-seeking behavior of genealogists. It identifies problems experienced by genealogists in their search for information and recommends solutions by explaining what librarians can do to make primary sources more accessible and usable for genealogists. In doing so, it also illuminates the goals of genealogists, how they search for information, and what they expect of libraries.

This study indicates that secondary sources cannot completely satisfy the information needs of genealogists. Therefore, genealogists must use primary sources, including original manuscripts and/or their facsimiles of community historical court documents, vital records, and non-governmental records. This presents a problem since publishing companies rarely supply the local primary source records needed by genealogists. Furthermore, primary sources were not created with genealogists in mind. These historical documents originally served specific governmental or legal functions, so they often lack indexes or a clear sense of organization.

The results of the study indicate that genealogists research a family's lineage beginning with the present and work to discover the identity of each subsequent generation of ancestors. Their tools consist of historical documents containing relevant evidence of the identities and kinship of ancestors. They may use place names or dates, but more frequently, they search by names of individuals or by surnames. Ideally,

librarians should gather and arrange primary sources pertaining to their communities in order to accommodate genealogists' goals and methods.

Creating collections of primary sources for genealogical research attract many new library users. In addition, it presents the library with the opportunity to document its community's uniqueness while satisfying its customer's desire to find his or her place in it.



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## **Chapter 1: Introduction and Statement of the Problem**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The growing interest in ancestry brings a steady flow of genealogists into U.S. libraries. According to a 1995 poll, more than one-hundred and thirteen million Americans are researching their family histories.<sup>1</sup> A *Time* magazine article in 1999 stated that “root seeking ranks with sex, finance and sports as a leading subject on the Internet.”<sup>2</sup> In 2000, results of a poll by Maritz Marketing Research and Genealogy.com found sixty percent of Americans at least somewhat interested in tracing their family history, compared with forty-five percent at least somewhat involved with genealogy five years earlier.<sup>3</sup> A 2005 poll by Market Strategies, Inc. and MyFamily.com found seventy-three percent of Americans interested in discovering their family history, a thirteen percent increase over the previous Maritz Poll.<sup>4</sup>

According to the American Library Association, “public libraries have a responsibility to serve the needs of patrons interested in genealogical research by

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<sup>1</sup> “Give Me Your Wired, Your Poor: Surfing the Web, Searching Your Roots” *American Heritage* 52.3-4 (May-June 2001): 11. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Thomson Gale.  
[http://find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=EAIM&docId=A74572169&source=gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=tel\\_p\\_memshel&version=1.0](http://find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=EAIM&docId=A74572169&source=gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=tel_p_memshel&version=1.0) (accessed 7 September 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Time Magazine, “Roots Mania: Spurred By New Resources on the Internet, the Ranks of Amateur Genealogists are Growing, and Millions of Family Trees are Flourishing,” *Time* (April 19, 1999): 54. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Thomson Gale,  
[http://find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T003&prodId=EAIM&docId=A54364979&source=gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=tel\\_p\\_memshel&version=1.0](http://find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T003&prodId=EAIM&docId=A54364979&source=gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=tel_p_memshel&version=1.0) (accessed 13 October 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Gerda Gallop-Goodman, “Indicators; We Are Family,” *American Demographics* (Sept 2000): NA. *PROMT*. Thomson Gale,  
[http://find.galegroup.com/ips/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T003&prodId=IPS&docId=A67001149&source=gale&srcprod=PRS&userGroupName=tel\\_p\\_memshel&version=1.0](http://find.galegroup.com/ips/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T003&prodId=IPS&docId=A67001149&source=gale&srcprod=PRS&userGroupName=tel_p_memshel&version=1.0) (accessed 13 October 2007).

<sup>4</sup> National Genealogical Society, “Americans' Fascination with Family History is Rapidly Growing,” *NGS: Genealogy News*, 9 June 2005, <http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/news-genealogy.cfm> (accessed 13 October 2006).

providing basic genealogical reference materials and how-to-do-it books in the library and by providing access to additional genealogical research materials through interlibrary loan or referral.”<sup>5</sup>

For those librarians wishing to go beyond the very basic collection for genealogists, ALA states:

Libraries should include manuals and handbooks of how to do genealogical research; family histories; pedigrees, originals or copies thereof, and published compilations of family group sheets; vital records; census schedules; probates and wills; land records; maps; cemetery and religious records; immigration and naturalization records; voter lists; military records; newspapers; local history materials and indexes to the above materials of communities, counties, states, and countries other than the community which the library serves. These items may be available and provided in various formats, including microform, print, and digital.<sup>6</sup>

Libraries and producers of information sources try to make access to the information they contain “user-friendly,” that is, capable of being used independently by those who need information. Even so, users occasionally encounter unanticipated barriers to information while using these sources. The user may lack knowledge of what sources exist or how to find and use them or a time limitation. Fortunately for the user, the reference librarian’s primary task is to help such individuals overcome these barriers.<sup>7</sup>

Barriers to accessing information in published sources are troublesome, but genealogy presents even greater challenges. The complexity of genealogy reference results from the need to connect users with historical documents more so than published

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<sup>5</sup> American Library Association, Reference and User Services Association, *Guidelines for Developing Beginning Genealogical Collections and Services*, June 1999, <http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotools/referenceguide/guidelinesdeveloping.htm> (accessed 6 December 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Charles A. Bunge and Richard E. Bopp, “History and Varieties of Reference Services,” in *Reference and Information Services: An Introduction*, ed. Richard E. Bopp and Linda C. Smith (Englewood, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2001), 3.

secondary sources. These primary sources are not neat information packages with user-friendly indexes and clear-cut organization. Rather, these appear as mostly hand-written documents in less-than-ideal condition created for purposes other than genealogy. Instead of locating information in a perfect-bound book or an attractive database, the user must decipher archaic script and terminology.

Not surprisingly, genealogists find gleaning information from historical records difficult and time-consuming because they frequently lack indexes and a clear sense of organization. Is it enough to just accept that these sources are difficult to use? Is this just a simple unalterable fact, or can information professionals help remove some of the barriers to information contained in these documents in order to enable genealogy customers to access the information they need?

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

Genealogy is the branch of history involving the determination of family relationships, the collecting the names of relatives, and documenting the relationships between them.<sup>8</sup> Genealogical research, rarely a short or easy process, requires a great deal of effort to locate sources, decipher data, and interpret results. The most important aspect of the research process involves the use of primary sources. The utilization of these original documents created at or near the time of a historical event is the basis of reliable genealogical research.<sup>9</sup>

Librarians try to accommodate genealogists in their research, but collection development ordinarily relies on the acquisition of published works and not primary

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<sup>8</sup> Val D. Greenwood, *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1990), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Laura Szucs Pfeiffer, *Hidden Sources: Family History in Unlikely Places* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 2000), xvii.

source content.<sup>10</sup> Genealogists need to access their community's historical court documents, vital records, and non-governmental records. This presents a problem since the local primary source records needed by genealogists are rarely supplied by publishing companies. Librarians, either in public or privately funded libraries, must find alternative means to acquire these records to make available for their genealogy customers.

Furthermore, primary sources were not created with the genealogists in mind.<sup>11</sup> These historical documents originally served specific governmental or legal functions, so they usually do not have the access points designed to suit the information-seeking behavior of genealogists. They often lack indexes or a clear sense of organization, so researchers may need extensive assistance in navigating through these records. The barriers to utilizing primary sources require information staff to spend additional time providing user instruction to researchers. It is not enough to simply provide a genealogy customer with a primary source; the librarian must also be prepared to explain its use and value.<sup>12</sup>

Inter-library loan increases access to many primary source documents, but one must ask if this is enough. Accessibility gets the material into the hands of the genealogist, but it does not guarantee the means to glean the desired information from the document. The librarian's priority is to insure the fulfillment of the information need, and in this case, the need necessitates the use of historical documents. So, what can librarians do to improve the usability of these primary sources?

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<sup>10</sup> Arlene G. Taylor, *The Organization of Information* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 1999), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargraves Lueking, ed., *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1997), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Lois C. Gilmer, *Genealogical Research and Resources: A Guide of Library Use* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1988), 23; Richard Harvey, *Genealogy for Librarians* (London: Clive Bingley Ltd., 1983) 14.

Although the usability of primary sources is an important consideration, previous literature has given the subject little attention. This thesis weighs user needs against typical collection development policy and procedures, and suggests improvements in approaches to the use of primary sources as references. It explains the importance of genealogy to libraries, analyzes the goals of genealogists, and examines what steps need to be taken to make primary sources usable for genealogists. Information in the thesis comes from a variety of published works as well as new data gathered from a survey of experienced genealogists. This study emphasizes the importance of the accessibility of information and contributes a new understanding of genealogy user needs and methods to satisfy their requirements for information.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This study examines the gap between genealogists' needs and services provided by libraries. The main question addressed is: *what can librarians do to make primary sources more accessible and usable for genealogists?* To answer this, the researcher examines genealogists' goals, their methodology, how they learn to research, their expectations of libraries, how they search, and the difficulties they face in conducting their research.

Successful libraries have user-centered services that require librarians to have an understanding of the users' tasks in order to help them accomplish their goals. For this reason, collections must be seen from the perspective of user tasks.<sup>13</sup> Understanding the

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<sup>13</sup> William C. Robinson, *IS560 Community Analysis*, Lecture notes, School of Information Sciences, University of Tennessee, January 2006, [http://web.utk.edu/~wrobinso/560\\_lec\\_commun-analysis.html](http://web.utk.edu/~wrobinso/560_lec_commun-analysis.html) (accessed 20 December 2006).

users' goals and methodology helps the librarian better choose information packages and arrange them for the greatest accessibility.

This thesis emphasizes how librarians can best provide access to information contained within essential materials for genealogical research. Establishing user-centered services requires adapting to the user's information needs. These needs involve the utilization of primary sources in the form of historical documents. For this reason, librarians must borrow ideas and techniques from archivists in order to make needed primary sources available and useable for genealogists.

Typically, archives and libraries differ in what materials they hold. The difference stems from the purpose and process by which documents are created and maintained. Libraries tend to collect published, self-contained, and self-explanatory information packages deliberately created in large numbers and widely disseminated to inform, educate, entertain, or delight a wide audience. Archives collect and preserve unique documents resulting from the activity they record and create to communicate to a defined audience for a specific purpose.<sup>14</sup>

Genealogists challenge librarians to re-think their collection development policies and mission statements. Librarians cannot simply rely on published sources to satisfy the information needs of their patrons interested in genealogy. Rather, they need to be able to supply the customer with access to original historical documents or their facsimiles. Librarian Richard Harvey, author of *Genealogy for Librarians*, found that the need to acquire and make accessible primary sources often leads librarians to "fulfill a function

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Jo Pugh, *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 15-16.



normally thought to be that of archivists.”<sup>15</sup> In doing so, librarians will naturally consult archival sources to learn how to best preserve and arrange primary sources. For this reason, this thesis makes reference to relevant archival studies in addition to genealogy methodologies and writings about the interactions of librarians and genealogists.

#### **1.4 What is Genealogy?**

The genealogist’s task involves tracing one’s ancestry beginning with a parent and glean information from various sources to identify each subsequent ancestor. The genealogist focuses primarily on the discovery or verification of facts needed to prove family lineages, but he or she also looks for everyday details about how individuals lived in the past in order to create a family history. The process involves the use of certain types of sources and a particular way of examining them.

Most experts recommend certain basic strategies to follow in conducting genealogical research. Christine Rose, a Fellow of the American Society of Genealogists, recommends that the genealogist should first find a simple and consistent way to organize his or her research. Most will keep some sort of a notebook with dates of notes and the proper source citations. Loose papers should be filed in folders by subject and/or date.<sup>16</sup>

The research process begins before ever entering the library. Staff of the Latter-day Saints Family History Library recommends that the genealogist begin research by interviewing relatives and gathering known documentation. He or she should ask relatives for pertinent information such as where and when ancestors lived, who their

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Harvey, *Genealogy for Librarians*, London: Clive Bingley Ltd, 1983, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Christine Rose and Kay Germain Ingalls, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Genealogy* (Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 1997), 27.

relatives were, and when they were married. The researcher should also gather useful documents such as birth certificates, death records, marriage licenses, newspaper articles, photographs, letters, school yearbooks, and military records. Generation and pedigree charts used to record initial findings can be accessed for free through [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org).<sup>17</sup>

The next step involves acquiring copies of vital records created within the last two or three generations of the family being researched. These include death certificates, marriage licenses, and birth records. They usually contain information regarding where and when people lived as well as the names of parents and other relatives. Local health departments or state archives normally house such documents.<sup>18</sup>

Social Security Applications include similar information. These can be acquired through the Social Security Administration. These records include the full name of the applicant, date and place of birth, and full names of both parents. These can be searched online at <http://ssdi.rootsweb.com/>.<sup>19</sup>

The genealogist should next look for other research in journals, books, and online sources that may have been done on the family being researched. The findings may not always be accurate, but they may help locate additional clues. These sources include: family scrapbooks, Bibles, and previous genealogy projects; online sources such as [www.rootsweb.com](http://www.rootsweb.com), [www.usgenweb.org](http://www.usgenweb.org), and [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org); published

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<sup>17</sup> Latter-day Saints, *Family Search*, 1991, [http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Home/Welcome/frameset\\_information.asp](http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Home/Welcome/frameset_information.asp) (accessed 2 February 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Patrick W. O'Daniel, *History/Social Sciences Department: Genealogy Pathfinder* (Memphis: Memphis Public Library and Information Center, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

genealogies and articles in local history and genealogy journals; and the local Latter-day Saints Family History Center.<sup>20</sup>

The genealogist should work backward in time using multiple, overlapping sources to ensure the quality of his or her work. Since most sources of genealogical information have some potential for inaccuracies or deceptions, it is best to look for as many sources as possible that might give information about the same event. The sources can then be compared to verify facts. Columbia University professors Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, authors of *The Modern Researcher*, wrote that when a historical researcher “is faced with a piece of evidence in any form, the critical mind goes to work with the aid of a systematic interrogatory: Is this object or piece of writing genuine? Is its message trustworthy? How do I know?” Barzun and Graff point out the importance of understanding what the document states and what can be inferred from it; knowing the author helps in gauging the truth of a statement; the value of a piece of testimony depends on how close the witness was to the event; examining more than one independent witness’s account increases the chance of eliminating fallibility; having proximity to the event, whether or not he or she fully understood the facts, harbored a bias by partisan facts, and whether or not he habitually told the truth, can help the researcher judge the reliability of the source.<sup>21</sup>

Good research depends on the use of primary sources.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, genealogists frequently find these records a challenge to use. Genealogical research

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<sup>20</sup> Latter-day Saints, *Family Search*, 1991, [http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Home/Welcome/frameset\\_information.asp](http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Home/Welcome/frameset_information.asp) (accessed 2 February 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1992), 157-159.

<sup>22</sup> Pfeiffer, xvii.

would certainly be even easier if each ancestor and organization dutifully recorded every scrap of information available as events took place, but in reality, preservation rarely occurs until much later. The National Archives, for example, did not put the Ellis Island immigration records on microfilm until 1938, two decades after the development of the technology. By that time, the oldest manifests were forty-six years old and beginning to tear.<sup>23</sup> The microfilmed versions of these and other records often reflect the deteriorated condition of the original source. To complicate matters, researchers must also decipher eighteenth and nineteenth-century handwriting and terminology. Other than the occasional family Bible, genealogists rarely encounter a record created for the sole purpose of recording the family lineage. Therefore, the researcher must rely on materials created for other purposes that happen to contain information about family relationships.<sup>24</sup>

Genealogists need items such as death certificates, birth certificates, marriage records, wills, probate proceedings, funeral records, and land transfers to conduct research. One should remember that tax collectors, census takers, and county court clerks have never kept records for the purpose of making the future genealogist's work easy. In addition, records keepers rarely organized or kept documents in places readily accessible to the amateur genealogist.

Australian archivist Paul MacPherson describes a situation similar to what genealogists sometimes encounter in the United States. He writes:

But I think it is fair to say, without denigrating the work and personal commitment of reference archivists of the past, that in practical and

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<sup>23</sup> *American Heritage* 52.3-4 (May-June 2001): 11.

<sup>24</sup> Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargraves Luebking, ed., *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1997), 1.

strategic terms the provision of access was seen more as a statutory responsibility to be managed than as a desirable outcome, or the primary purpose for keeping large quantities of records. The needs and interests of agencies were more important than those of researchers and other public end users of archives.<sup>25</sup>

Genealogists search for, and collect, names during all stages of research. They want lists of names, or name indexes, or search engines that retrieve names. They narrow their searches by dates and determining relevancy of material by the date they were created. The desired prize at the end of the search is always the same: the original primary source document that verifies a particular fact.<sup>26</sup> Genealogists need to examine large amounts of primary source material in conducting research. Searching through these materials can take a great deal of time depending on how and their method of organization. Any library that can acquire these materials or copies of them is certainly appreciated by genealogists. The librarians find it challenging to find a means of document storage, retrieval, and preservation that insures not only accessibility, but usability.

### **1.5 Primary Sources and Duplicate Records**

The National Genealogical Society defines a primary source as a “record created at the time of, or shortly after, an event by someone with personal knowledge of the facts, or the testimony of a person involved in the event.”<sup>27</sup> Even so, genealogists need not actually handle original historical documents. Repositories and genealogical publishing companies frequently make photocopies, microfilm, or scanned duplicates available for

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<sup>25</sup> Paul MacPherson, “Improving Access for the Public to the Collection of the National Archives of Australia,” *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 31 (June 2000): 79, available online Tennessee Electronic Library, Expanded Academic ASAP.

<sup>26</sup> Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A. Johnson, “Where is the List with All the Names? Information-Seeking Behavior of Genealogists,” *The American Archivist* 66 (Spring/Summer 2003): 79-95, 85-87.

<sup>27</sup> National Genealogical Society, *National Genealogical Society Learning Center* (NGS: 2002), <https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/Resources/courseone/glossary/p.cfm> (accessed 19 February 2005).

use by researchers in order to preserve fragile historical documents and increase accessibility.

More importantly, the reproductions hold the same evidential value as the original. Elizabeth Shown Mills, editor of the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, wrote: “Duplicates are a staple of genealogical research. In many cases, the duplicate may be the only surviving copy. In other instances, it may be the only one to which we have access.”<sup>28</sup> Mills illustrates the value of duplicates by citing the *Federal Civil Judicial Procedure and Rules* Rule 1002 (4) which refers to a duplicate as “a counterpart produced by the same impression as the original, or from the same matrix, or by means of photography, including enlargements and miniatures or by mechanical or electrical re-recordings, or by chemical reproduction or by other equivalent techniques which accurately reproduce the original.” Rule 1003 indicates the admissibility of duplicates under most circumstances in courts of law.<sup>29</sup>

Many libraries and archives use microfilm as a method of preservation and accessibility. Modern microfilm can last up to five-hundred years as long as producers and owners of the microfilm meet certain conditions. Manufacturers should process microfilm according to *ISO 18901:2002 Imaging Materials*, using silver gelatin type black and white films. Owners should store microfilm according to *ISO 18911:2000 Imaging Materials – Processed Safety Photographic Films – Storage Practices*.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence! Citation and Analysis for the Family Historian* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing company, 1997), 49.

<sup>29</sup> *Federal Judicial Procedure and Rules* (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, 1995), rules 1002 and 1003; cited in Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Evidence! Citation and Analysis for the Family Historian* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing company, 1997), 49.

<sup>30</sup> Kodak Company, “What is the Life Expectancy of Microfilm,” *Kodak Reliable Image Tip #50*, <http://72.14.209.104/search?q=cache:QtEKfMGLhkIJ:www.kodak.com/global/en/business/docimaging/do>

A facsimile will suffice as a primary source as long as it accurately represents the original document. Problems occur for librarians when facsimiles of the sources their customers need have not been made available. In this case, the librarian must acquire those in-demand local records or work out a way to make copies of them. For example, Dr. James Johnson, the former head of the History/Social Sciences Department of the Memphis Public Library and Information Center, worked out agreements with the local health department to borrow their historical vital records, copy them, index them, and return the originals. In return, the health department received for their troubles a cleaned-up and organized set of records along with a copy of the printed index. The same was done with some local funeral homes, except that they usually gave the library their old records.

This creative approach illustrates how librarians can seek out unpublished materials to meet the information needs of their customers. The Memphis librarians borrowed techniques from archivists and utilized partnerships with other community agencies and businesses as a means of collection development. Now the library's collection consists of indexes, microfilm, and many original documents. The flexibility of the library's mission allows the librarians to acquire records from a variety of sources which may not always be the case for archivists charged with focusing on local governmental documents.

## **1.6 Importance of Genealogy to Libraries**

The rising interest in genealogy following the Centennial and Bi-centennial brought a greater numbers of genealogy patrons to libraries. The perception of libraries'

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[wnloads/techTips/techTip50.pdf+%22life+expectancy%22+microfilm&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us](#)  
(accessed 19 February 2007).

roles in genealogical research changed as well within the profession. Librarians began to recognize genealogists as an important community of users with special needs worthy of being addressed.<sup>31</sup> They saw genealogy collections as a way to extend library services to a wider cross-section of the community.

The abilities of librarians to offer assistance to genealogists improved over time as well. The National Archives offered an increasing number of records on microfilm for purchase, including federal decennial census records. Even so, in 1975 few indexes for these sources available existed outside the Latter-day Saints' library. The limited number of transcribed records meant limited access for the researcher. In addition, programs or databases for family historians did not exist.<sup>32</sup> By the 1980s, an increase in genealogy publications allowed for more materials to incorporate into collections. Gale and Greenwood Press, among others, responded to the interest with the release of guidebooks and indexes.<sup>33</sup> Numerous other companies have taken advantage of genealogy's popularity such as *Heritage Quest* and *Ancestry* by not only publishing books and journals, but by offering services through the World Wide Web.

Technology also affected genealogical research. Following World War II, advances in microfilm and photo-duplication technology made it easier for genealogists to access and record information.<sup>34</sup> The most recent event to encourage aspiring genealogists has been the opening of the World Wide Web. Genealogists now utilize

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<sup>31</sup> Russell E. Bidlack, "The Awakening: Genealogy as It Relates to Library Service," *RQ* (Winter 1983):174.

<sup>32</sup> Kory L. Meyerink, *Printed Sources: A Guide to Published Genealogy Records* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1998), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Lois C. Gilmer, *Genealogical Research and Resources: A Guide for Library Use* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1988), 4.

<sup>33</sup> Bidlack, 175.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.



electronic mail, discussion lists, and bulletin boards to exchange information, eliminating the need for a great deal of travel. Volunteer efforts brought about online depositories of data about certain families or records from specific locations such as those found on USGENWEB ([www.usgenweb.org](http://www.usgenweb.org)).

Eventually, electronic databases emerged to manage large amounts of various kinds of data and information. The Latter-day Saints launched a database containing many of their records in 1999. This followed efforts by volunteer organizations including USGENWEB and RootsWeb to make genealogical data freely available on the Internet. According to Kory Meyerink, founding director of the Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy:

Databases and indexes, especially since [the 1990s], have become essential tools in genealogical research. In fact, with the current information explosion and increased availability of earlier records, databases and indexes are the best tools with which genealogists can search large collections of records successfully.<sup>35</sup>

Librarians recognize the growing demand for genealogical materials and the advances in technology. A number of libraries and archives now successfully organize genealogical information and present it online in digital libraries. Some examples include the Library of Virginia, The National Archives and Records Administration, and Daughters of the American Revolution Library. Genealogist Douglas Dunks wrote: “Digital libraries are the most exciting thing I’ve seen in research since the invention of the Xerox machine in 1964. In the researching of my ancestors, I turned up a treasure

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<sup>35</sup> Szucs and Luebking, 35.

trove of data in minutes, which would have taken me months to find using traditional methods.”<sup>36</sup>

Research into ancestry began to take a significant turn in recent decades, one that makes the subject even more important to information providers. The trend has been to go beyond genealogy and into family history. The two terms are sometimes used interchangeably though there are some distinct differences. According to Val Greenwood: “While the goal of the genealogists has traditionally been to identify and link together past generations of ancestors into pedigree, the goal of today’s family historian is to do that as well as to understand something of the lives and times of specific persons, couples, or families over one or more generations.”<sup>37</sup> Essentially, the family historian hopes to discover more about his or her ancestry than mere data. This need for in-depth research naturally leads the researcher to libraries in hopes of useful resources and helpful instruction.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

Genealogy continues to be popular in the United States and important to libraries. It was once a past-time of the elite, but in recent years it has become popular among all classes, ethnicities, and age groups. In turn, librarians made serving genealogists a priority. The advent of the Internet increased interest dramatically in the 1990s and a great deal of information became available online though the efforts of volunteers and genealogy publishing companies. These are impressive accomplishments, but every innovation raises the expectations for immediate access to information. Furthermore, the

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<sup>36</sup> Douglas Dunks, “Digital Libraries: University of Michigan Digital Text Collection,” *Eastman’s Online Genealogy Newsletter*, 6 January 2005, available online at [http://blog.eogn.com/eastmans\\_online\\_genealogy/2005/01/digital\\_librari.html](http://blog.eogn.com/eastmans_online_genealogy/2005/01/digital_librari.html) (accessed 15 April 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Greenwood, 565.

information need does not end with the use of a secondary source; the genealogist must have the original primary source to insure the quality of his or her findings.

Genealogists find secondary sources useful, but the original primary source remains the valued prize and the most important piece of evidence in conducting genealogical research. Unfortunately, even experienced genealogists find primary sources difficult to use. Genealogists primarily search by name and use dates and places as qualifiers, but historical records were not created with the genealogist in mind, so they lack this type of organization. Libraries can acquire records and make them available, but what can librarians do to make the information contained in the documents accessible to genealogists?

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Genealogical research relies on unpublished primary sources, and genealogists have on-going information needs without a clear termination point. Genealogists often trace their ancestry until they run out of sources. Librarians experience frustration in assisting genealogists because of their seemingly endless demands and the extended time required to answer their questions and locate sources. Genealogists experience frustration because of the lack of information and expertise provided by most librarians.<sup>38</sup>

Genealogists need access to primary sources, but they also need them organized and arranged in a user-friendly manner. In addressing these problems, librarians should ask: What are the goals of genealogists? How do genealogists search for information? What do genealogists expect of libraries?

This chapter examines existing approaches to genealogical research and providing library services to genealogists through a review of relevant literature. It ties into the overall thesis by not only describing the importance of genealogy to libraries, but by illustrating the gap between what genealogists need and what libraries actually provide. It begins with an explanation of literature selection followed by “The Development of Genealogical Research,” an examination of literature covering the growth of interest in genealogy and its importance to libraries, “Genealogists as Users,” writings dealing with

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<sup>38</sup> Anne Billeter, “Why Don’t Librarians Like Genealogists? Beginning Genealogy for Librarians,” *OLA Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 2-6, available online through Library Lit&Info Sci FTX (accessed 4 January 2007).

the information-seeking behavior of genealogists, and “Librarians and Genealogists,” the relationship between genealogists and librarians.

## **2.2 Selection**

This chapter focuses on the growth of interest in genealogy, librarian and genealogist interactions, information-seeking behavior of genealogists, and genealogy methodology. The literature selection consists of works addressing aspects of library service to genealogists pertinent to the thesis. It includes both books and articles from reputable reading lists.

Genealogy methodology books in this review came from the suggested readings from the courses taught at the Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research at Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama. Begun in 1962, the Samford Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research provides an educational forum for the discovery, critical evaluation, and use of genealogical sources and methodology led by nationally prominent genealogical educators. The Certification Board of Genealogists co-sponsors this academically and professionally oriented program headed by a faculty composed of outstanding nationally known genealogy educators.<sup>39</sup>

The researcher selected articles from the Professional Development and Education portion of the Librarians Serving Genealogists website.<sup>40</sup> LSG was established with the cooperation of the American Library Association (ALA), the Federation of Genealogical Societies (FGS), and the National Genealogical Society (NGS) to help librarians who serve genealogy patrons. Formation began at the 1993 NGS conference in

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<sup>39</sup> Samford University Library, *Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research* homepage, 2 October 2006, <http://www.samford.edu/schools/ighr/ighr.html> (accessed 9 October 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Irene Hanson, “Readings for Librarians,” *LSG: Professional Development and Education*, 23 December 2005, <http://www.cas.usf.edu/lis/genealib/readings.html> (accessed 9 October 2006).

Baltimore. In 1994, the group presented its first roundtable or open forum at the NGS conference in Houston, Texas. In May 1996 at the NGS conference in Nashville, Tennessee a steering committee first met to discuss ways to help librarians who serve genealogists. The organization's emphasis on education made it a logical choice as a source for published works on library service to genealogists.<sup>41</sup>

Selection continued with the examination of bibliographies and databases. The authors of books and articles cite sources and recommend further readings. Those lists proved useful in locating influential material to review. Some examples include: *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*; *Library Journal*; *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts*, by Mary Jo Pugh; *The Librarian's Guide to Genealogical Services and Research*, by James Swan; and *The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy*, by Val Greenwood. Databases such as Library Lit Full-Text and Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts (LISTA), Expanded Academic ASAP, and Newsbank available through The University of Tennessee's John C. Hodges Library website proved most useful in locating articles as well.

### **2.3 The Development of Genealogical Research**

A number of events encouraged interest in genealogy and brought it to the forefront of considerations for library services. Genealogy in the United States found a larger audience in 1876, the year of the Centennial. The great interest in the birth of the United States encouraged interest in ancestors who fought in the Revolutionary War. The Daughters of the Revolution urged the government to organize the service and pension records of the Revolutionary soldiers so that they would be accessible to the public.

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<sup>41</sup> Pam Cooper, "About LSG," *Librarians Serving Genealogists*, 23 December 2005, <http://www.cas.usf.edu/lis/genealib/about.html> (accessed 9 October 2006).

Research became easier, but not pursued by everyone. During this period genealogy had been the past-time of people who could spend long hours researching and had money to spend on travel.<sup>42</sup>

Renewed interest in genealogy came a hundred years later during the U.S. Bicentennial as many researched ancestors who fought during the Revolutionary War. Also, Alex Haley's book, *Roots* was made into a television mini-series inspiring many others to find their ancestors. Author Bethany Latham wrote: "Although genealogical research has formerly been the realm of little old ladies whose blood was as blue as their hair, today people of all ethnic backgrounds are beginning to search for their roots."<sup>43</sup> Russell Bidlack surveyed a number of librarians around the country and found an especially noticeable surge in the interest in ethnic research. African American and Native American research became topics of interest, as well as that of recent immigrants. Interest grew in the research of the more "common people" rather than the typical heraldry popular among more affluent White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.<sup>44</sup>

An increase in popularity certainly occurred following 1976, but Lloyd DeWitt Bockstruck, Supervisor of the Genealogy Section of the Dallas Public Library, argues that interest in genealogy actually began during the colonial period. William Byrd's genealogy appeared in 1698, Benjamin Franklin conducted research and interviews with relatives while in England, and George Washington compiled a genealogy in 1792. The New England Genealogical Society, the first of its kind, formed in 1845. Two years later

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<sup>42</sup> Doane and Bell, v; Bethany M. Latham, "The Genealogist and the Library: An Interesting Partnership," *Alabama Librarian* 53, no. 1 (2003): 12-16, Available through online database Library Lit&Info Sci FTX 12/84-12/05.

<sup>43</sup> Crandall, 7; Latham, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Bidlack, 175.

it published the first genealogical periodical, *The Register*. Various other publications appeared through the 1850s and 1860s. In 1862, William H. Whitmore prepared *The Handbook of American Genealogy, Being a Catalogue of Family Histories and Publications Containing Genealogical Information*. County histories and genealogies became popular following 1876. Leading the way were S.J. Clarke, Goodspeed Publishing Company, and Thompson and West.<sup>45</sup>

The U.S. Centennial also encouraged the formation of hereditary societies, which in turn, emphasized more thorough research. The Sons of the Revolution formed in 1876, followed by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1890, the General Society of Colonial Wars in 1893, and the General Society of Mayflower Descendants in 1897. Membership depended on accurate documentation of lineage based on the use of vital records.<sup>46</sup>

Genealogists as library patrons demanded greater access to hereditary society's publications. Ten new publications appeared in the 1880s, and fifteen more in surfaced in the 1890s. More appeared every decade as interest in genealogy grew. Donald Lines Jacobus published *The Index to Genealogical Periodicals* (1932-1953) and Harold Lancour, dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Sciences, University of Pittsburgh, compiled his bibliography of ship passenger lists (1538-1825) in *The Bulletin of the New York Public Library* in 1937. Librarian Fremont Rider recognized the need for access to the growing genealogy literature as well. He first published his Index in 1935 in

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<sup>45</sup> Lloyd DeWitt Bockstruck, "Four Centuries of Genealogy: A Historical Overview," *RQ* (Winter 1983): 162-164.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.



card form, and later as a hard-back book in 1940. By 1983, it consisted of one-hundred and twenty-six volumes.<sup>47</sup>

The *Genealogical Periodical Annual Index*, begun in 1957, cataloged many previously un-indexed and inaccessible periodicals and genealogical data. Its authors created it largely in response to the high frustration experienced by genealogical researchers and library staff by the need to locate individuals in periodicals and primary source records. Between 1897 and 1917, the staff of the Newberry Library in Chicago created an index of more than a million entries, making their collection the most accessible in the nation.<sup>48</sup>

Other important bibliographies and indexes appeared in the 1970s, including works by P. William Filby, Timothy Field Beard, and the Daughters of the American Revolution. Genealogy's popularity inspired the publication of more indexes, and in turn, the availability of more sources encouraged more people to take up genealogy. Diane Foxhill Carothers wrote: "Genealogy is now [in 1983] outranked in popularity as a hobby in the United States only by stamp collecting and coin collecting." In the five years before her article's publication, the staff of the National Archives saw an increase in business of seventy-nine percent. About seventy-five percent of the 310,000 researcher cards issued and ninety percent of mail correspondence in 1980 related to genealogy.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>49</sup> Diane Foxhill Carothers, "Introduction," *Library Trends* (Summer 1983): 3.

This trend continues to increase. According to archivist Aprille Cook McKay, eighty-five percent of users of the National Archives are researching their family history by 2002.<sup>50</sup>

The marked increase in library usage following 1976 brought more genealogy customers to libraries. As a result there was a change in the perception of libraries' roles in genealogical research within the profession. Librarians recognized genealogists as an important community of users with special needs worthy of being addressed.<sup>51</sup> Librarians acquired more materials enabling them to offer greater assistance to genealogists. In 1975, census indexes were scarce and there were no computer programs or databases for family historians. The limited number of transcribed records meant limited access for the researcher.<sup>52</sup> Fortunately for librarians and genealogists, genealogy publishing increased to meet the new demand. Gale and Greenwood Press, among others, responded to the interest with the release of guidebooks and indexes.<sup>53</sup> Numerous other companies have taken advantage of genealogy's popularity such as *Heritage Quest* and *Ancestry*. According to Russell Bidlack and Bethany Latham, other significant milestones include the advances in microfilming, Xerox machines, and the coming of the Internet.<sup>54</sup>

One might expect that librarians would welcome the substantial increase in customers. Instead, many have the opposite reaction, seeing genealogists as a burden or a nuisance. According to Dr. Russell Bidlack, an ALA article from 1926 that states "some libraries do not think it justifiable to spend money derived from public tax for books in so

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<sup>50</sup> Aprille Cook McKay, "Genealogists and Records: Preservation, Advocacy, and Politics," *Archival Issues* 27, no1, 2002. p. 23-33, available online through Library Lit&Info Sci FTX 12/84-9/06 (accessed 10 December 2006).

<sup>51</sup> Russell E. Bidlack, "The Awakening: Genealogy as It Relates to Library Service," *RQ* (Winter 1983):174.

<sup>52</sup> Meyerink, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Gilmer, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Bidlack, 175.

<sup>54</sup> Bidlack, 174; Latham, 12-16.

special a field.”<sup>55</sup> Richard Harvey describes the typical genealogist as enthusiastic but unaware of research methodology. He points out that providing the correct sources consumes a great deal of staff time as does giving user instruction. This raises the issue among some of whether or not librarians should even both trying to assist genealogists. Harvey believes some librarians are “at least unwelcoming to genealogists, if not positively hostile.”<sup>56</sup>

Harvey provides some reasonable arguments against excluding service to genealogists. He points out the “curious fact” that librarians who are so concerned about the under-use of libraries would not take advantage of the opportunity to bring in more customers. Genealogy introduces libraries to those who have not used them previously. Genealogists are “highly motivated” and can prove to be helpful allies in the community. He believes that librarians should at least be welcoming and give basic assistance, in part, because of the benefits they bring to libraries.<sup>57</sup>

This attitude among both librarians and archivists continued through the 1950s, but began to change in the 1960s and 1970s as interest in genealogy grew. Many libraries eventually accommodated the growing demands of genealogy customers.<sup>58</sup> Roy Turnbaugh believes the view of genealogists is changing. He wrote: “This condescension toward non-scholarly users is, at last, beginning to break down everywhere. This is

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<sup>55</sup> Bidlack, 171.

<sup>56</sup> Harvey, 10-11.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>58</sup> Bidlack, 171.

predominantly due to the fact that in a period of diminished budgets, archivists have been forced to realize the importance sheer numbers of users can have for an institution.”<sup>59</sup>

Allen County (IN) Public Library director Rick Ashton points out accommodating genealogists paid off for his library and community. Before 1976, Allen County Public Library was a popular destination for genealogists, but after the surge of interest in the late 1970s, business increased significantly. Today, genealogists travel to Fort Wayne from all over the country specifically to access the library. This means they spend a great deal of money in town for lodging, meals, parking, gas, and photocopies, benefiting not only the library, but the whole community.<sup>60</sup>

Central Kansas Library System and the Great Bend Public Library director James Swan suggests that librarians use surveys to record usage of genealogy collections by tourists. Swan wrote: “Even more important than leveraging tourism created by the genealogy department is making sure the department gets its share of the annual funding the library receives through regular channels.” Portraying libraries as important tourist attractions can insure additional funding for genealogy collections.<sup>61</sup>

## **2.4 Genealogists as Library Users**

Collection development for genealogy differs from other subject areas. Richard Harvey noticed that the need to acquire primary sources often leads librarians to “fulfill a function normally thought to be that of archivists” because of the need to organize and

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<sup>59</sup> Roy Turnbaugh, “The Impact of Genealogical Users on State Archives Programs,” *Library Trends* 32 (Summer 1983): 40.

<sup>60</sup> Rick J. Ashton, “A Commitment to Excellence in Genealogy: How the Public Library Became the Only Tourist Attraction in Fort Wayne, Indiana,” *Library Trends* (Summer 1983): 95.

<sup>61</sup> James Swan, *The Librarian’s Guide to Genealogical Services and Research* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 2004), 20.

preserve historic documents.<sup>62</sup> Original sources used in genealogy were not created for the purpose of genealogical research, therefore, these materials can be difficult to arrange. Unlike libraries, the government institutions that created these records usually did so without well organized and indexed collections of documents readily available for the public to use.<sup>63</sup>

Records in their final life-cycle stages often move to an archive where they are organized by provenance, creators, time, or place. This method of arrangement may help historians, but not genealogists. Duff and Johnson wrote: “Genealogists gain their knowledge in spite of the system, not because of it.” The authors found among the genealogists surveyed in their study that most did not find [archival] finding aids especially useful. Successful genealogical research often relies on the researcher’s prior knowledge of different types of documents and networking among other researchers who are willing to offer advice and assistance.<sup>64</sup> In order to use these materials, genealogists must re-frame their questions to suit the organizational methods of the archives. Unfortunately, the genealogist may not have enough information about an individual to specify an exact time or location.<sup>65</sup>

Harvey states that one should keep in mind how genealogists search for information and arrange materials so that they can be searched by time, place, and most importantly, by name.<sup>66</sup> Duff and Johnson agree that genealogists, at least in the early stages of research, search primarily by name. Unfortunately, most archival information

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<sup>62</sup> Harvey, 12.

<sup>63</sup> Gilmer, 23; Harvey, 14.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Harvey, 13.

systems do not provide name indexes or facilitate name searches. Ideally, most prefer to have some sort of database with a search engine that allows Boolean searches in order to access images of the original documents.<sup>67</sup>

Duff and Johnson explain that there are actually three different stages of genealogical research: the first involves collecting names; while the second involves gathering details about the individuals; and the third deals with putting one's findings into historical context.<sup>68</sup> Yakel finds that while initially, the information need may be expressed in terms of the search for practical information, such as a grandmother's birth date or place, the genealogist ultimately needs "orienting information." Finding ancestors in the past provides a means of finding one's own identity in the present.<sup>69</sup>

Genealogical research, especially at the point where it becomes family history, does not have a clear end goal and it should be viewed as an ongoing process of seeking meaning. "The ultimate need is not a fact or date, but rather it is to create a larger narrative, connect with others in the past and in the present, and to find coherence in one's own life."<sup>70</sup> Yakel found that initially genealogists search for basic facts about events and dates, but often "the search broadened out to a more encompassing inquiry for information about one's ancestors' lives or even of the time period in which they lived." Essentially, genealogists will follow a family line until no further research can be done. At that point, they will often start another line.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 84-85.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Yakel, "Seeking Information, Seeking Connections, Seeking Meaning: Genealogists and Family Historians," *Information Research* 10, number 1 (October 2004): <http://informationr.net/ir/10-1/paper205.html> (accessed 26 July 2006).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

## 2.5 Librarians and Genealogists

The interest in genealogy continues to grow. In the years since Alex Haley's book *Roots* and the subsequent television miniseries inspired Americans' interest in family history, genealogy, once considered the past-time of a small group of the elite, has become one of the most popular hobbies in the country. According to Smithsonian writer Nancy Shute, some of the reasons for the increase include a growing pride in ethnicity, a proliferation of Internet genealogy sites, and the realization by baby boomers that the "World War II generation of their parents is quickly disappearing."<sup>72</sup>

According to Donald Litzer, head of Adult Services of the McMillan Memorial Library, Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin: "the 'Third Generation Phenomenon,' identified by M. L. Hansen in the 1930s, holds that while first and second-generation immigrants to America seek to distance themselves from their ancestors and ancestral culture to confirm their 'Americanness,' third or fourth-generation Americans value and seek to discover their heritage. Americans may also be inspired to search for a firmer identity in an increasingly consumerist, homogenized, and culturally vacuous society. The persistence of all these factors suggests that interest in genealogical research, and consequently a continuing demand for genealogical services, will continue."<sup>73</sup> Research usually begins at home, but the local public library serves as the starting point for more in-depth research.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Nancy Shute, "New Routes to Old Roots : Twenty-Five Years After Alex Haley's Best-Seller Topped the Charts, Millions of Americans are Using High-Tech Tools to Find Their Ancestors," *Smithsonian* (March 2002): 76. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Thomson Gale.

[http://find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC- Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=EAIM&docId=A84352438&source=gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=tel\\_p\\_memshel&version=1.0](http://find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC- Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=EAIM&docId=A84352438&source=gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=tel_p_memshel&version=1.0) (accessed 7 September 2006).

<sup>73</sup> Donald S. Litzer, "Library and Genealogical Society Cooperation in Developing Local Genealogical Services and Collections." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 37.1 (Fall 1997): 37(1). *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Thomson Gale.

<http://find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC->

One expects librarians to embrace this potential flood of enthusiastic customers, but genealogy tends to leave them with mixed feelings. Its appeal centers on the amount of business it generates and sense of responsibility to genealogists, but many librarians shy away from it because it is, on the surface, overly cumbersome.<sup>75</sup> Information providers find genealogy challenging for a number of reasons. Book sellers provide a large number of user-friendly published sources, but librarians find themselves using even more unpublished sources that require familiarity or some degree of expertise in order to help genealogists.<sup>76</sup> In addition, one must have an understanding of the methodology of genealogy in order to arrange, organize, and make accessible information needed for this type of research. Finally, genealogists vary greatly in their level of research expertise which effects the amount of time spent on user-instruction.<sup>77</sup> Also, a certain open-endedness characterizes the information need. Often, a newly discovered fact only fuels the desire for more information, so that no amount of information and assistance ever completely satisfies the genealogist.<sup>78</sup>

Many have lauded genealogists as a great untapped market for libraries since the 1970s. Even so, librarians sometimes show reluctance in committing to provide services to them. Libraries struggle to create a workable policy of collection development and user instruction with limited budgets and staff time that will satisfy. Harvey points out that

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[Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=EAIM&docId=A53432233&source=gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=tel\\_p\\_memshel&version=1.0](http://www.gale.com/Products/Reference/Books/Books.asp?prodId=EAIM&docId=A53432233&source=gale&srcprod=EAIM&userGroupName=tel_p_memshel&version=1.0) (accessed 7 September 2006).

<sup>74</sup> National Genealogical Society, *Suggestions for Beginners: Climbing Your Family Tree* (Arlington VA, NGS, 2005): <http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/edugetstart.cfm> (accessed 7 October 2006); Desmond Walls Allen and Carolyn Earle Billingsley, *Using Libraries and Archives* (Conway, AR: Arkansas Research, 1997): <http://www.arkansasresearch.com/g-lib.html> (accessed 7 October 2006).

<sup>75</sup> Richard Harvey, *Genealogy for Librarians* (London: Clive Bingley Ltd, 1983), 11.

<sup>76</sup> Billeter.

<sup>77</sup> Beth Stahr, "Preparing to Work with Genealogists: Educational and Service Opportunities for Genealogical Librarians," *Louisiana Libraries* 65, no. 3 (Winter 2003): 5-8.

<sup>78</sup> Yakel.



genealogists can provide a potentially great customer base, but on the other hand, they can provide a great source of difficulty. Genealogists, especially beginners, tend not to have an awareness of how much work goes into conducting a family history project. They find information sources difficult to identify and use, and to complicate matters further, beginning genealogists require a considerable amount of user instruction in utilizing sources and equipment. Essentially, the problem of genealogy involves unfulfilled user expectations and staff frustrations over the amount of time and effort required to satisfy information needs of genealogists.<sup>79</sup>

Genealogy is a type of history, but less experienced genealogists lack basic historical research skills. The typical beginning genealogist has enthusiasm, but lacks understanding of the methodology of genealogy as well as sources, how to use them, and how to determine the quality of information gleaned from historical documents. Primary source materials available in libraries usually take the form of microfilm and require librarians to instruct beginners in how to read the materials and use the format. They often begin without prior experience with these materials or familiarity with how libraries work. The challenging nature of genealogy and the research naiveté of many genealogists causes them to be labeled “challenging library patrons.”<sup>80</sup> As a result, some librarians do not believe in providing assistance to genealogists.<sup>81</sup>

These problems sometimes result in an unfriendly environment. Customers can become frustrated by how much work actually goes into finding what they perceive as basic information about their ancestors. Staff members find it difficult having to spend so

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<sup>79</sup> Harvey, 15; Stahr, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Litzer.

<sup>81</sup> Harvey, 11.

much time explaining how to use records and equipment. These interactions affect library business as genealogists and librarians develop negative attitudes toward one another. Some perceptions of genealogists by librarians include: genealogists are not a primary constituency and not as important as other customers; they are not doing “real research;” they have to be taught how to do research; they need to be taught how to use the library, and library equipment; information they need is not “packaged” neatly; and sometimes there is simply no answer to a genealogist’s question. Genealogists tend to believe librarians are too busy, they know little about genealogy, they don’t like to help genealogists, and they can never answer genealogy questions.<sup>82</sup> In the end, genealogists miss out on needed information and libraries lose customers and develop a negative reputation.

P. William Filby, one of genealogical librarianship’s foremost figures, once wrote: “There is hardly a librarian who does not speak scathingly of the genealogist.” Friction between librarians and genealogists often comes from the complicated nature of the sources used in this type of research. Published secondary sources available in print and in databases make providing service to genealogists easier than before, but only to a point. Ready-reference sources will rarely satisfy a genealogist’s quest for specific family information; he or she will often need, at an early research stage, primary sources not originally intended for genealogical research and not always organized in a user-friendly manner.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Jean Cooper, *The Librarian and the Genealogist Should Be Friends* (power point presentation from The Virginia Library Annual Conference, 10 October 2005), [www.vla.org/05Conf/Presentations/IntrotoGenealogy.ppt](http://www.vla.org/05Conf/Presentations/IntrotoGenealogy.ppt) (accessed 15 August 2006).

<sup>83</sup> Litzer.

Providing reference service to genealogists can take a great deal of time and it often requires a great deal of user instruction. After all, genealogy is historical research often conducted by amateurs. On the other hand, part of the problem may be in a lack of preparation on the part of the librarian. Perhaps, those on both sides of the reference desk would find genealogical research easier if the primary source records needed by genealogists were better organized in such a way to save time and effort of both customer and staff.

## **2.6 Access to Genealogical Records**

Librarians develop collections most often in three ways: librarians learn about the existence of new works through reviews, publishers' announcements, requests from library users and then order the materials; donors give gifts to add to the collection; and/or approval plans, worked out with one or more vendors, bring in new items according to pre-selected profiles.<sup>84</sup> Collecting local genealogical primary source records offers librarians an interesting challenge. Not only do librarians have to locate these materials and find the means to acquire them, but they also have to arrange these unprocessed information packages into usable genealogical sources. Having historical records stored in boxes or on microfilm is only helpful to those researchers determined to search a collection from beginning to end to find the desired information.

The user-friendliness of materials influences the use of libraries. F. Wilfrid Lancaster, noted professor of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois, sees the perceived ease of use as the major criterion in selecting an information source and the overriding factor influencing use of a particular information service. User studies indicate

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<sup>84</sup> Taylor, 6.

that ease of use ranks higher than quantity and quality of information. T. J. Allen and P. G. Gerstberger stated that “more investment in library holdings will be wasted unless at the same time we make this material more accessible to the user.” Furthermore, R. M. Dougherty and L. L. Blomquist surveyed academic libraries and found that many researchers attach greater importance to accessibility of collections than to the their comprehensiveness.<sup>85</sup>

Clearly, accessibility is equally important as acquisition. Library patrons will more likely use professionally developed collections if they find them convenient, easy to use, current, and contain needed content.<sup>86</sup> Preparing historical documents for use by genealogists differs greatly from traditional methods of acquisition. The literature surveyed clearly indicates that libraries have an obligation to collect materials to suit the interests and needs of patrons. Unfortunately, the authors of the books and articles of the literature review do not elaborate fully on how to achieve this by using genealogical primary sources.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

The literature review summarizes what has been published on genealogy and genealogy library service by scholars and researchers. The researcher selected these works from reputable bibliographies and searches of periodical databases. The review does not list all the material published related to the subject, but rather, it provides a synthesis and evaluation of works that discuss, in part, the importance of genealogy to

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<sup>85</sup> F. Wilfrid Lancaster, *The Measurement and Evaluation of Library Services* (Washington, DC: Information Resources Press, 1977), 312-319.

<sup>86</sup> William C. Robinson, “Importance of Professionally Developed Collections,” IS560 lecture notes, School of Information Sciences, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, January 2006, [http://web.utk.edu/~wrobinso/560\\_lec\\_importance.html](http://web.utk.edu/~wrobinso/560_lec_importance.html) (accessed 21 December 2006).

libraries and its reliance on primary sources. More importantly, this chapter illustrates the need to further examine the need for librarians to improve the usability of primary sources for genealogists.

The literature reviewed covers the information needs of genealogists and their relationship with libraries. Genealogists have a history of looking to libraries for assistance in research. They expect the availability of information, but libraries do not always meet their needs. This combined with the complicated nature of genealogical research often creates unfriendly relations between librarians and genealogists. Understanding this problem has changed the way many librarians provide service to genealogists. Many information professionals now recognize the importance of genealogy customers and strive to accommodate them.

Another strength of the literature lies in its coverage of the information-seeking behavior of genealogists. The authors of the books and articles reviewed agree that genealogists primarily search for information for individuals in historical records and they use locations and dates as qualifiers. Local archives and county court houses often do not have records arranged with the genealogist in mind. Libraries, on the other hand, have better arranged collections, but they usually do not have the primary source materials needed.

The literature provides useful information, but it does not fully explain how to make primary sources more usable to genealogists. The literature does not clearly indicate what documents to select for the collection. Once the librarian identifies the materials, he or she needs to know how to acquire them. Once they are acquired, then the librarian must decide how to arrange the collection. Saying that libraries need these

materials is important, but it is just as important to indicate what steps to take to achieve the goal of having an accessible collection of primary sources for genealogists.

The strengths of the reviewed literature are: the explanations of the information needs of genealogists; the use of the history of the relationship between family researchers and librarians to illustrate the importance of genealogy to libraries; descriptions of efforts to improve library services to genealogists; and the explanations of the information-seeking behavior of genealogists. Gaps remain in our understanding of how to arrange collections and create indexes to accommodate the needs and information-seeking behavior of genealogists.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Review of the Problem**

The most important aspect of the genealogical research process is the use of primary sources, especially those governmental and private records created on the local level with information about family relationships. These records often lack indexes or a clear sense of organization, and as a result, researchers may need extensive assistance in navigating through them. Accessibility gets the material into the hands of the genealogist, but it does not guarantee the means to glean the desired information from the document. Librarians insure the fulfillment of the information need, and in this case, the need necessitates the use of historical documents. So, what can librarians do to improve the usability of these primary sources?

The literature reviewed in the previous chapter provides useful information, but there are gaps in how to fully utilize primary sources as reference sources. The literature does not completely point out what documents to select for the collection. Once the librarian identifies the materials, he or she needs to know how to acquire them. Once they are acquired, then the librarian must decide how to arrange the collection. The authors state the importance of local historical documents to genealogy, but it remains to be seen what makes these primary sources usable to the average genealogist.

### **3.2 Survey Overview**

The survey clarifies how genealogists prefer to search for information. The previous literature review provides the observations of librarians who work with genealogists, results of the study of professional genealogists by Duff and Johnson, and

insights into the needs of genealogists based on works on genealogical research methodology. The survey provides input from experienced users. New data regarding particular instances of genealogists using certain types of records gives new insight into how librarians can best arrange and index collections of primary sources to accommodate them.

The survey consists of both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Some questions only required short answers, but others allowed the respondent to reply at length. Open-ended questions encourage the respondent to think and allow the respondent to clarify and explain a response. If the respondent takes needed time and makes the effort, responses can be illuminating and yield much useful information.<sup>87</sup>

This cross-sectional survey uses a sample consisting of ten experienced genealogists. The inspiration for the study came from an article entitled “Where Is the List with All the Names? Information-Seeking Behavior of Genealogists,” by Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A. Johnson, appearing in *The American Archivist*, volume sixty-six, Spring/Summer 2003. The authors investigated the use of archives in Nova Scotia by professional genealogists. This survey resembles the Duff and Johnson article in its examination of genealogists’ ability to access information in historical documents. The survey differs in that it includes an examination of ten non-professional or semi-professional genealogists with experience using various libraries across the United States.

Why focus on the experienced genealogist rather than the novice? Richard Harvey described beginning genealogists as typically enthusiastic, but unaware of research

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<sup>87</sup> William C. Robinson, *Questionnaires*, lecture notes, IS540 Research Methods, University of Tennessee, School of Information Sciences, January 2006, [http://web.utk.edu/~wrobinso/540\\_lec\\_gaire.html](http://web.utk.edu/~wrobinso/540_lec_gaire.html) (accessed 28 December 2006).



methodology.<sup>88</sup> They rarely begin research with the knowledge of proper methodology. Instead, beginners learn research techniques as needs arise while they look for information. They begin with a conscious need without necessarily having knowledge of the sources or procedures to use to acquire the desired information. As the need comes into focus with a formal statement, they explore different sources that might possibly contain relevant information. Experience in the use of sources and judging the quality of information retrieved comes over time in the course of conducting research.

The novice does not yet have enough experience with primary sources to understand their value. Often, they simply rely on the first source encountered as their sole source of information, even though it is a secondary source. Michael John Neill, the Course I Coordinator at the Genealogical Institute of Mid America, wrote:

When I began my research, I was content with finding an entry in a transcription or a published extract. After all, why did I need the actual record when I had an easier to read typed version? The day someone finally told me to “get the original” (and it actually sunk in) was the day I started realizing that transcribers do make mistakes and that published extracts can leave out significant clues.”<sup>89</sup>

According to Milton Rubincam, the problems of relying on secondary sources are not obvious to beginning genealogists. He wrote:

But the sad fact is that many genealogies and family histories contain erroneous statements because the compiler has accepted the unverified statements of previously published works, has failed to go to the original sources of information, and has not evaluated the evidence.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Harvey, 10.

<sup>89</sup> Michael John Neill, “What I Wish I Had Known,” *Ancestry Daily News*, 14 December 2005, <http://www.ancestry.com/learn/library/article.aspx?article=10759> (accessed 9 February 2007).

<sup>90</sup> Milton Rubincam, *Pitfalls in Genealogical Research* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1987), 1.

Gene Hall, CEO of FamilyTrackers, Inc., wrote: “Nobody told me how to do genealogical research; I learned from trial and error.”<sup>91</sup> Experienced genealogists gain knowledge through direct observation or participation. Over time they advance from the novice stage by learning about primary sources and research techniques from successes and failures. Their experience with many different sources in many different situations enables them to know the difference between a usable source and one that is less than user-friendly. Being experienced does not necessarily depend on the amount of time spent doing research, but rather it depends on the researcher acquiring the ability to use genealogical sources and to judge the quality of information contained in them. The novice will certainly recognize the difficulty of use of a collection of historical documents, but experienced genealogists have more exposure to different collections of primary sources in different libraries and archives making them better subjects for study.

The experienced genealogist is not necessarily an expert genealogist. The experienced genealogist has learned lessons from successes and failures over time in conducting research, as well as reading books on the subject of genealogy methodology. The expert genealogist, on the other hand, stands apart from the experienced genealogist because he or she has studied genealogical research in an academic setting, and as such, he or she is recognized as having, involving, or displaying special skill or knowledge. These genealogists expect the difficulties involved in working with primary sources. They certainly appreciate a well-organized manuscript collection and index, but the lack of user-friendly access points hampers them less than those with less training.

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<sup>91</sup> Gene Hall, “*Genealogy Mistakes and Faux Pas for Beginners- Laugh and Learn From Mine*,” Family Trackers blog, 28 September 2005, <http://familytrackers.blogspot.com/2005/09/genealogy-mistakes-and-faux-pas-for.html> (accessed 9 February 2007).

This survey focuses on the experienced genealogists because their familiarity with the importance of primary sources and usage of different collections. This is not to say that the needs of novices and experts should not be taken into consideration in collection development, but rather that experienced genealogists give a better indication of how a collection should be arranged because they make up the largest group of potential users. Most novices will eventually become experienced, but few will become experts. It appears to make more sense to arrange collections around the needs of genealogists that will characterize the typical user.

### **3.3 Participants**

The researcher conducted the questionnaire electronically using an online survey service. The respondents found the online format preferable to a paper survey. It allowed the respondents to fill out the forms at their convenience with little time constraints. The researcher reassured the participants by clearly stating the survey's objectives and methods. None of the questions in the interview involved any personal or sensitive information, and the interviewees were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

The survey met an exemption category since its design easily guaranteed the interviewees' anonymity. The survey required the use of *Form A: Certification for Exemption from IRB Review for Research Involving Human Subjects* since the research involved the use of interview procedures without recording information in such a manner that the human subjects can be identified. The researcher submitted an information sheet in lieu of respondent consent forms, since the online format allowed the participants to give consent electronically.

### 3.4 Instrument Design

The survey gives a short introduction about its content and purpose followed by specific, but simple instructions. It begins with general information about the purpose of the survey, the surveyor, and the institution represented. It indicates that answers take the form of either a check or a number ranking. It also gives an idea of how much time the survey will take.<sup>92</sup> The survey's introduction clarifies the scope of the study and the obligations of the interviewer. It states the survey functions to collect information about the needs of genealogists and their expectations of libraries, the participants may terminate the survey at any time, and the surveyor guarantees anonymity.

The survey starts with general questions about using primary sources in genealogical research followed by more specific questions about the use of certain kinds of records. According to Janes: "For self-administered questionnaires, it often helps to lead off with the most interesting, non-threatening questions to get people to start answering questions, leading to the tricky or problematic questions toward the end, and finish off with demographic questions (age, gender, educational level, unless of course these are the tricky ones) which are quick and easy."<sup>93</sup>

The survey incorporates checklists and comparative rating scales recommended by Fink and Kosecoff.<sup>94</sup> The surveyor designed a short, easy-to-understand instrument to encourage the respondent to finish the survey. Joseph Janes warns: "In a mail or handout

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<sup>92</sup> Joseph Janes, "Survey Construction," *Library Hi Tech* 17, No. 3 (1999): 321-325.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Arlene Fink and Jacqueline Kosecoff, *How to Conduct Surveys: A Step-by-Step Guide* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1985), 35.

survey, they can stop at any stage and once they do, you may well have lost them.” The questions avoid abbreviations and the survey allows enough space for answers.<sup>95</sup>

Janes wrote: “The most important thing to remember is that people will answer the question you ask them, not necessarily the question you wanted to ask them. The words you use and the way in which a question is constructed can have profound implications for the answers you get.”<sup>96</sup> With this in mind, careful consideration went into the writing of the survey questions. The questions relate to the problem at hand and focus only on information necessary for the thesis. The survey makes use of clear, unambiguous, and precise questions. Definitions were given where appropriate and jargon was avoided. The wording of the questions allowed the respondents to say what they think rather having the interviewer lead. The questions cover familiar situations encountered in typical genealogical research. The questions only call for as much detail as the interviewee was willing to offer. The survey includes only short questions. The surveyor excluded double-barreled questions (compound sentences) and negative sentences (those using “not”), as well as biased wording.

The surveyor asks the respondents specific questions about the use of certain types of records that would typically make up part of a library’s local history and/or genealogy collection. These records typically date from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and represent materials used in the beginning stages of a genealogy project. These include vital records covering birth, death, and marriage, as well as probate court records, naturalization files, funeral home records, newspapers, and

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<sup>95</sup> Joseph Janes, “Survey Construction,” *Library Hi Tech* 17, No. 3 (1999): 321-325.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

tax records. The variety of information provided in these records allows the indexer to choose from a number of potential access points.

### **3.5 Conclusion**

The most important aspect of the genealogical research process involves the use of primary sources. Unfortunately, these records often lack indexes or a clear sense of organization, making them difficult to use. Users may have access to records, but it does not guarantee the means to glean the desired information from the document. The literature reviewed in the previous chapter provides useful information, but it does not clearly indicate what documents to select for the collection and how to arrange them. The survey presented in this thesis provides new insight into organizing collections of primary sources for use by genealogists by clarifying their needs, preferences, and user-behavior.

## **Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The researcher chose to conduct a survey in order to solicit opinions directly from experienced genealogists in order to better understand what materials genealogists need most and how librarians should organize those materials in order to accommodate them. The questionnaire allowed a comparison of the findings of the literature review with new information gathered from human subjects in order to understand how to best provide serve to genealogists. The results of the study provide new understanding of how librarians can help patrons access information contained within historical documents.

The study explored experienced genealogists' wants and needs in using essential historical local records. The questions covered the participants' opinions of the value of primary sources in genealogical research. The survey also examined the participants' preferences in accessing certain types of records used in genealogical research. The instrument allowed genealogists to indicate the best access points to information contained within historical documents.

The findings of the study appear in this chapter question-by-question, except for those dealing with the participants' profiles. Fink and Kosecoff suggest that relatively easy-to-answer questions and personal questions should appear at the end of questionnaires.<sup>97</sup> Alreck and Settle agree, stating that "demographic and biographic questions are almost always at the very end of the questionnaire."<sup>98</sup> These appear out of

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<sup>97</sup> Fink and Kosecoff, 44.

<sup>98</sup> Pamela L. Alreck and Robert B. Settle, *The Survey Research Handbook: Guidelines and Strategies for Conducting a Survey* (Chicago: Irwin, 1995), 152.

sequence in the presentation of the findings to allow the reader to understand the characteristics of those people who made up the sample before viewing the answers they provided. The survey questions appear in the appendix in the back-matter of the thesis.

The previous literature appearing in chapter 2 usually does not draw distinctions between levels of expertise among genealogists. The researcher found it necessary to define the differences in order to better describe those who took part in the survey. The experienced genealogist has learned lessons from successes and failures and studied the subject of genealogy as opposed to the novice who has little or no experience with sources and methodology. The expert genealogist stands apart from the experienced genealogist because he or she has studied genealogical research in an academic setting. Most novices will become experienced, but not all will become experts. This is not to say that the needs of novices and experts should not be taken into consideration, rather, experienced genealogists will give a better indication of how a collection should be arranged because they make up the largest group of potential users.

#### **4.2 Administration of Survey**

The researcher administered the instrument after the UT Library Human Subjects Departmental Review Committee (DRC) granted approval for the study. The survey required the use of *Form A: Certification for Exemption from IRB Review for Research Involving Human Subjects* since the project met an exemption category and the design easily guaranteed the interviewees' anonymity. The researcher substituted an information sheet in the place of respondent consent forms since the online format allowed the participants to give consent electronically.



The researcher conducted the questionnaire through Free Online Surveys ([www.freeonlinesurveys.com](http://www.freeonlinesurveys.com)). It was easy to set up and the program updated the results immediately after the respondents completed their surveys. Respondents received invitations by e-mail with a link to the online survey. The questionnaire began with an overview, instructions, and key terms appear on the first page. The questionnaire included both ranking and fixed-choice questions, as well as open-ended questions to allow the participants to include opinions beyond the limits of the written questions.

The researcher e-mailed invitations to members of the local genealogical society, volunteers at the local public library's genealogy department, paid researchers, and independent genealogists in Memphis, Tennessee. Fourteen people took part in the survey of the fifteen invited to join. They simply followed the link and began the survey at their convenience. The participants took part in the study voluntarily without pay and responded within two weeks of the initial invitations.

#### **4.3 Profile of the Participants**

A portion of the questions focused on information about those who took the survey. The participants answered questions about how long they have been involved in genealogy, how they learned to conduct research, and where they conduct most of their research. The results indicate that each had knowledge of genealogical research methods and sources to contribute to the study. As experienced genealogists, the participants offer knowledge based on first-hand experience and abilities in genealogical research. They have familiarity with primary sources and understand their value. They also have experience in a variety of repositories using different indexes and finding aids. The responses indicate that ten of fourteen of the respondents have ten years or more

experience conducting genealogical research. An equal number, have five to ten years experience and five years or less experience (see Table 1).

The responses indicate that genealogists learn research skills in various ways. Of those surveyed, three out of fourteen were self-taught, learning through trial and error, and four out of fourteen took a class or classes after getting started in genealogy (see Table 2). No one surveyed studied genealogy methodology before starting his or her initial research. Half the respondents selected “other” and gave the following open-ended responses:

1. All of the above apply
2. I worked as a scribe for my father who was involved in genealogy and caught the "fever." I observed and learned about primary and secondary sources from him.
3. Assisted by library staff
4. I asked the Librarian for help
5. I was taught by librarians.
6. Self taught then started filling gaps in my knowledge with classes and workshops
7. I had parents and grandparents who were genealogist. I have also taken classes and taught myself, with the help of good friends, which is the best way for me.

**Table 1: Respondents’ Experience with Genealogical Research**

<b>Years of experience</b>	<b>Median Score</b>
Five years or less	2 / 14
Five to ten years	2 / 14
Ten years or more	10 / 14

**Table 2: How Respondents Learned to Conduct Genealogical Research**

<b>Learned by...</b>	<b>Median Score</b>
Self-taught: Learned through trial and error	3 / 14
Self-taught: Studied methodology before beginning research	0
Learned by taking a class or classes	4 / 14
Other	7 / 14

The respondents compared several typical destinations where they conduct most of their research. The researcher asked them to rate the least used with 1 and the most frequently used with 4 (See table 3). They ranked libraries as the most frequently used, followed by archives, researching online, and courthouses. The survey allowed the respondents to list other important locations in there research. Five participants gave the following answers when asked: “Where else do you research genealogy?”

1. personal letters and other material, as well as personal interviews.
2. travel to various places where ancestors are known to have lived- family records
3. writing to family members
4. Various publications of genealogy societies in states where clients lived
5. Historical societies

#### **4.4 The Importance of Primary Sources in Genealogical Research**

The following questions examine genealogists’ opinions about the importance of primary sources, difficulties in accessing them, and the need for indexing. The responses bring to light additional insight into the relationship between genealogy and primary sources. All fourteen respondents rated using primary sources as very important. Almost half of the respondents, six out of fourteen, felt that the most difficult part of using primary sources involved finding what library, archives, or courthouse holds the needed records. Only one believed that finding the right source to use, traveling to the location

**Table 3: Ranking Places to Conduct Genealogical Research**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Median Score</b>
Archives	2.64/ 4
Libraries	3.50/ 4
Courthouses	1.57/ 4
Online	2.29/ 4

where the records are kept, or finding the information in the records upon arrival the most difficult. In addition, five out of fourteen found all choices equally difficult (see Table 4).

The researcher then asked the respondents to rank several frequently used primary sources by degree of difficulty to locate and use on a scale of 1 for easiest and four for most difficult. The respondents ranked pre-World War II military records and Social Security applications the most difficult to locate and use. Access to these records requires genealogists to search online indexes for a particular person, e-mail a request for the appropriate request forms from the National Archives and Records Administration, and mail in the completed paperwork with payment. Genealogists typically receive photocopies of their requested documents after six to eight weeks.

On the other hand, the respondents ranked the federal census as the easiest to locate and use. Online genealogy databases through Ancestry and Heritage Quest allow access to federal census records from 1790 to 1930. Both require payment for a subscription, but public libraries occasionally make these available for their users. In addition, libraries with genealogy collections often have microfilmed census collections with printed indexes.

**Table 4: The Most Difficult Aspect of Using Primary Sources**

<b>Area of Difficulty</b>	<b>Median Score</b>
Finding the right source to use	1 / 14
Finding what library, archives, or courthouse owns the needed records	6 / 14
Traveling to the location where the records are kept	1 / 14
Finding information in the records	1 / 14
All are equally difficult	5 / 14
Other	0

The respondents ranked local vital records nearly as difficult to locate and use as the federal records (see Table 5). These differ from the federal records in that once the genealogist locates the desired records, he or she can access them immediately. The difficulty lies in accessing the information contained within the document because of inadequate indexing and in either traveling to the location where the records are kept or waiting for the records to arrive through inter-library loan.

In addition, the open-ended responses included other records the respondents found difficult to locate and use. These included foreign records and very early American Colonial records. The participants stated the following as other genealogical records difficult to locate and use:

1. wills, probate
2. Georgia revolutionary patriots
3. difficult to locate records from other countries
4. vital records from foreign countries records from Later Day Saints(Mormon)
5. The records from the early American period. From the original immigrants, but more so for those in the periods a little later than that. The 17th century period.

The difficulty in accessing foreign records involves a lack of availability and the occasional need for translation. Many early American Colonial records deteriorated greatly before microfilming efforts in the mid-twentieth century. A great number of these records simply have not survived over time.

**Table 5: The Most Difficult Primary Sources to Locate and Use**

<b>Primary Source</b>	<b>Median Score</b>
U.S. Federal Census (1790-1930)	1.23/ 4
Social Security applications	3.00/ 4
Pre-WWII Military Records	3.15/ 4
Local Vital and Court Records	2.64/ 4

Over half the respondents (eight out of fourteen) will look for an easier source to use when faced with using a large record collection without an index or archival finding aid. Only three out of fourteen of the respondents indicated that they will use such a collection anyway as time allows (see Table 6).

Those that wrote comments in the free response section indicated that they would search an un-indexed collection under certain circumstances, but they preferred to use an index whenever possible. The participants mentioned using the following options to access large record collections without indexes or finding aids:

1. Look for an easier source which may help in searching the larger collection. If not available, use the collection anyway, as it may hold a wealth of information.
2. I would try to check a few at a time. If I found that they weren't useful then I would try and use other sources.
3. It depends on the collection and how hard it is to get the material it contains. If it is fairly easy to locate, then I would use an easier source, but if it is difficult, then I would probably take the time to use the collection. But I would really prefer having an index or finding aid!

All but one of the respondents indicated that they prefer indexes over archival finding aids. The findings reaffirm Duff and Johnson's findings that indicated that genealogists would rather search by names, dates, and/or places rather than by subject headings.<sup>99</sup>

**Table 6: Using Large Record Collections without Indexes or Finding Aids**

<b>Course of action</b>	<b>Median Score</b>
Look for an easier source to use	8 / 14
Use the collection anyway as time allows	3 / 14
Other (see Table 10)	3 / 14

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<sup>99</sup> Duff and Johnson, 91.

#### 4.5 Research Preferences: Birth Records

The majority of states did not require birth registrations until the first quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>100</sup> The responsibility was left to the individual states, so each will have different starting dates and contain varying information.<sup>101</sup> Early records contain only basic information such as the name of the child, parents, and date of birth. Some mid-nineteenth-century birth records began to include more detailed information such as the mother's maiden name, obviously helpful in determining the maternal lineage of a child.<sup>102</sup> Others also included addresses and the parents' places of birth.

Providing the exact date of birth is often required in order to access a birth record from a health department, courthouse, or archive since the record keepers arranged the records in chronological order. Some repositories have staff that will search records covering a five-year birth period. Unfortunately, genealogists look for birth records in order to determine a date of birth as well as names of parents. This leads to difficulty for the genealogist since he or she often only has a name from which to work.

Typically, state and local birth records contain the name of the child, name of each parent, date of birth, and place of birth. Librarians could arrange a collection of birth records by any of these pieces of information. Given a choice about arrangement, the respondents prefer to search by the name of the child. They rated "by name of child" the best way to search for birth records, followed by name of father, name of mother, date of birth, and place of birth (see Table 7).

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<sup>100</sup> Szucs and Luebking, 59.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 63.

**Table 7: Preferences in Searching for Birth Records**

<b>Means of searching</b>	<b>Median score</b>
By name of child	4.43/ 5
By name of mother	2.71/ 5
By name of father	2.79/ 5
By date of birth	2.57/ 5
By place of birth	2.50/ 5

#### **4.6 Research Preferences: Secular Marriage Records**

The United States does not have a national registry of marriages like England and other European countries. Rather, individual states have the responsibility of recording marriages as they do deaths and births. Consequently, types of records, the informational content, and organization of marriage records vary from place to place and time to time. Parents or legal guardians had to fill out consent affidavits for under-aged brides and grooms. These records often provide names of parents, brides, grooms, and ages.

Marriage records also include intentions, bonds, and contracts. Intentions were similar to church banns except that they were publicly posted with the town or county clerk. These records usually included the names of bride and groom, their home towns, and the planned date of their marriage.<sup>103</sup> Marriage bonds defrayed the cost of litigation in the event a bride or groom nullified a marriage. Grooms usually paid for bonds, but occasionally the father or brother of the bride would pay for them. Like intentions, these records usually included the names of bride and groom, their home towns, and the planned date of their marriage. Occasionally, wealthy brides and grooms marrying a second time drew up marriage contracts in order to guarantee the distribution of property

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 88.



to children. These records contain valuable information about children and spouses from previous marriages.<sup>104</sup>

Marriage licenses grant permission to perform a marriage. The person performing the marriage ceremony turns these forms in to the civil authority. These records usually contain the names of brides and grooms, residence, date of marriage, date of license, and the name of the person performing the ceremony.<sup>105</sup> The married couple receives the marriage certificate with their names and the date of the marriage. In some cases, the court will keep a copy as well. Information differs somewhat within different types of marriage records, but all contain maiden names of brides essential in tracing female ancestors.

Typically, marriage records contain the names of brides and grooms, dates of marriage, places of marriage, names of bondsmen, and names of clergy or justices of the peace. Given a choice about arrangement, the respondents prefer to search by the names of the brides and grooms. They rated “by name of brides and grooms” the best way to search for marriage records, followed by dates of marriage, places of marriage, bondsman’s name, and name of clergy or justice of the peace (see Table 8).

**Table 8: Preferences in Searching for Secular Marriage Records**

<b>Means of searching</b>	<b>Median score</b>
By names of brides and grooms	4.57/ 5
By dates of marriage	3.71/ 5
By place of marriage	3.29/ 5
By bondsman’s name	1.71/ 5
By name of Clergy or Justice of the Peace	1.71/ 5

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 91

Of course, genealogists appreciate having more than one access point to records. The participants stated:

1. The 1900 census gives the number of years married which is useful for a more thorough search.
2. I would use a combination of these methods also. I rarely do a search by the bondsman's name! The same with the clergy or JP.

#### **4.7 Research Preferences: Probate Records**

The three main types of legal actions/cases include civil actions (person versus person), criminal actions (state or people versus a person), and equity actions. Courts determine equity actions by “reasonable justice” and “common good” because legal remedies are inadequate or because enforcing the full letter of the law would be unjust.<sup>106</sup> Equity actions usually involve property rights and serve as an extension of civil actions. The remedy of the court sometimes involve an order or specific performance, such as delivering promised goods, replacing damaged property, divorce, adoption, and probate.<sup>107</sup> Probate court has general power over proving wills and proceedings involving the administration of estates and guardianships.<sup>108</sup>

Probate records generate some of the most valuable genealogical materials in the United States. The probate process transfers the legal responsibility for payment of taxes, care and custody of dependent family members, liquidation of debts, and transfer of property title to heirs from the deceased to an executor/executrix, administrator/administratrix, or guardian.<sup>109</sup> Probate records contain information needed to identify family members and determine their relationships to one another.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 202.

Original probate record collections usually only index the name of the deceased, if an index exists at all. This can hinder research since genealogists often only have the names of descendants of the deceased. Genealogists may have to look through many records before finding information relevant to the family in question.

Typically, probate records contain the names of the deceased, dates of death, places of death, names of spouses, and names of children, and the names of executors or administrators of estates. Given a choice about arrangement, the respondents prefer to search by the names of the deceased. They rated “by name of the deceased” the best way to search for probate records, followed by dates of death, places of death, names of spouses, names of children, and names of executors or administrators (see Table 9). Again, genealogists appreciate having more than one access point to records. One participant commented: “I use a combination here also!”

#### **4.8 Research Preferences: Death Records**

Like birth records, most states did not require official death records until after 1900. Even so, some municipalities kept death registers beginning as early as the eighteenth century. They usually contain the name of the deceased, date of death, place of

**Table 9: Searching for Probate Court Records (1 = Worst; 6 = Best)**

<b>Means of searching</b>	<b>Median score</b>
By name of the deceased	5.50/ 6
By date of death	4.43/ 6
By place of death (name of town, city, and/or county)	3.86/ 6
By name of spouse	3.29/ 6
By names of children	2.36/ 6
By name of executor or administrator	1.57/ 6

birth, and cause of death. More information began to appear in required state records. Twentieth-century death certificates frequently provide a starting point for genealogical research, since family researchers usually begin research in the present and work backwards in time. These death records generally contain the same information including the name of the deceased, sex, race, date of death, place of death, date of birth, place of birth, marital status, name of spouse, Social Security number, occupation, residence, father's name, mother's name, cause of death, and place of burial.

Death records, both early and modern, can help genealogists identify relatives of the deceased. Close relatives normally provided information in the records. "If the relative is a married daughter, the record will state her married name. Aunts, uncles, in-laws, cousins, and other relatives are listed as informants on death records. Each new name is a clue to the identity of other ancestors."<sup>110</sup> Death records provide valuable corroborating evidence for family traditions handed down from generation to generation without verification. Genealogists can use these records in conjunction with other sources distinguish between two people with the same name.<sup>111</sup>

Genealogists find death records, like other vital records, kept in original chronological order. Unfortunately, this does little to help the researcher who does not know the date of death. Typically, death records contain the names of the deceased, dates of death, places of death, names of spouses, and names of the informants. Given a choice about arrangement, the respondents prefer to search by the names of the deceased. They rated "by name of the deceased" the best way to search for probate records, followed by

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<sup>110</sup> Johni Cerny, "Research in Birth, Death, and Cemetery Records," in Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy* (Salt Lake City, UT: Ancestry Inc., 1997), 69.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

dates of death, places of death, names of spouses, and names of the informants (see Table

10). Four participants gave the following alternate ways to search for death records:

1. Social Security Death Index
2. Churches
3. Newspaper obits after discerning date of death
4. I use a combination of the above here also.

The responses suggest that they sometimes search other types of records for information about dates of death in order to access chronologically arranged death records.

#### **4.9 Research Preferences: Tax Records**

The use of tax records in genealogical research helps determine where certain people lived, when they lived in a particular location, and distinguishes between people with the same name. (For example: John Taylor, gambler; John Taylor, one eye; and John Taylor, hatter)<sup>112</sup> Things taxed have included carriages, watches, windows, whiskey, slaves, voters, and land. The content of these records vary greatly, but they generally contain the name of the person taxed and some details about personal property and/or others in the household. Colonial and antebellum poll taxes indicate the ages of heads of families and sons within a household. These records used in conjunction with other records can help verify the identities of family members.

**Table 10: Searching Death Records (1 = Worst; 5 = Best)**

<b>Means of searching</b>	<b>Median score</b>
By name of the deceased	4.64/ 5
By date of death	3.71/ 5
By place of death (specific address)	3.00/ 5
By name of spouse	2.29/ 5
By name of informant	1.36/ 5

<sup>112</sup> Sandra Leubking, "Land and Tax Records," in Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy* (Salt Lake City, UT: Ancestry Inc., 1997), 262.

Genealogists often find these records in original order with only a general index of heads of households, meaning all surnames beginning with “A” are grouped together, but not alphabetized, and so on. Occasionally, tax assessor’s filed reports late after the completion of the final report. Clerks often added these unsorted late entries to the end of the list. Tax records usually contain the names of property owners, places of residence, and date of the tax list. Given a choice, the respondents prefer to search by the names of the property owners over residence and date of the tax list (see Table 11).

#### 4.10 Research Preferences: Naturalization Records

Aliens become citizens through a legal procedure called naturalization. It includes declarations of intent, oaths of allegiance, affidavits, and petitions. James Hansen wrote: “While citizenship documents are sought by family historians, both for their sentimental and for their informational value, probably no other records are more difficult to fully understand or locate.”<sup>113</sup> Aliens may apply for citizenship in “any common law court of record, in any of the states wherein he shall have resided for the term of one year at least.”<sup>114</sup>

Unfortunately, these records appear in many different record groups often not indexed. The act of 1802 specified that free white aliens might be admitted to citizenship

**Table 11: Searching Tax Records (1 = Worst, 3 = Best)**

Means of searching	Median score
By name of property owner	2.62/ 3
By place of residence	2.00/ 3
By date of tax list	1.33/ 3

<sup>113</sup> James Hansen, Immigration: Finding Immigration Origins,” in Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy* (Salt Lake City, UT: Ancestry Inc., 1997), 472.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 479.

provided they: declared their intention to become citizens before a competent state, territorial, or federal court at least three years before admission to citizenship; took an oath of allegiance to the United States; had resided at least five years in the United States and at least one year within the state or territory where the court was held; renounced allegiance to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty; and satisfied the court that they were of good moral character and attached to the principles of the Constitution.

In addition, the act of 29 June 1906 (32 Stat. 596 sec. 3) brought about new standardized forms that included: the applicant's name, age, and personal description; date and place of birth; citizenship; present and last foreign address; ports of embarkation and entry; name of vessel; date of arrival; and names, ages, and places of birth of spouse, children, and other relatives.<sup>115</sup> These forms include: declaration of intention; petition; certificate of naturalization; naturalization certificate stubs; and certificates of arrival. On the local level, these forms appear within other court records arranged chronologically. The survey respondents indicated that they would prefer to search naturalization records by name, followed by date of immigration, date of the document, and location of the court (see Table 12). In addition, one respondent stated that he/she used information from the U.S. census to locate naturalization records.

**Table 12: Searching Naturalization Records (1 = Worst, 4 = Best)**

<b>Means of searching</b>	<b>Median score</b>
By name of immigrant	3.77/ 4
By date of immigrant's arrival in U.S.	2.54/ 4
By date of the document	2.30/ 4
By location of the court where the documents were filed	1.46/ 4

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 475.

#### 4.11 Research Preferences: Obituaries and Death Notices

Obituaries not only provide essential details about the deceased such as the name, occupation, age, date of death, and names of relatives, but they also give biographical information including date of birth, place of birth, names of parents, military service, religious affiliation, and length of residency or citizenship. “For more than two hundred years newspapers have recorded for the public the lives and the virtues of American citizens. An obituary distills the essence of a citizen’s life, and because it is a commemoration as well as a life chronicle, it reflects what society values and wants to remember about that person’s history.”<sup>116</sup> Obituaries also serve as a link to historic events such as wars, establishment of communities, creation of businesses, disasters, and other events that illustrate the importance of the deceased person and/or his or her family.

Until the twentieth century, the obituary page excluded most non-Caucasians, women, children, and poor people. The researcher should not expect to find an article about poor or working class people in the newspapers of the nineteenth century. “The first category of information, the name and occupation of the deceased, serves as the likeliest indicator of whether a person would be remembered on the obituary page, and so it offers the simplest and most obvious clues about exclusion. Simply put, the non-elite were typically omitted.”<sup>117</sup>

Twentieth century newspapers began to include more information about local deaths in the form of death notices to accommodate a wider reading audience. A more condensed version of an obituary, these short articles usually appear in a column entitled “deaths” or “died” and give basic information about the deceased such as the name,

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<sup>116</sup> Janice Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 12.

<sup>117</sup> Hume, 135.



occupation, the date of death, age, gender, place of death, address, names of immediate family, and place of interment. Though they lack much of the biographical information of full obituaries, death notice columns include many of the kinds of people usually excluded from earlier obituaries.

A genealogist can usually get the name of the funeral home used by the family from an obituary or death notice. In addition to the particulars of the funeral, records from funeral homes often contain much of the same information contained in death certificates such as the names of children, the spouse, and even pallbearers, who were close friends or other relatives. The religious service used will indicate the religious faith of the deceased and the church where other records may be found. Funeral records also mention the name of the cemetery where other family members may be buried. Headstones in family plots can provide names, relationships, birth dates, death dates, places of birth, and even military ranks.

Newspapers arrange obituaries and death notices alphabetically and/or by location within each issue. Online databases, such as Newsbank, allow genealogists to search for obituaries and death notices without knowing the exact date of death or publication date of the article. Unfortunately, few databases include articles predating 1990. Genealogists need some kind of index in order to navigate through rolls of microfilmed newspapers to locate a particular article.

Obituaries and death notices typically contain the name of the deceased, names of survivors, date of death, place of death (street address, city, county, and state), name of cemetery, and name of funeral home. The respondents scored the name of the deceased as the preferred means of searching, followed by date of death (see Table 13). Respondents

indicated in the open response follow-up question that they also search Social Security records and church records first in order to locate chronologically arranged newspaper articles.

#### **4.12 Conclusions**

Understanding how experienced genealogists search for information helps clarify what librarians should do to make primary sources more accessible and usable. Clearly, most genealogists prefer to search by name. The majority of the survey's respondents (ten out of fourteen) indicated they preferred to search by name over dates, places, or browsing through records (see Table 14). Those that wrote in other responses indicated that preferred to search by name in combination with other access points. They stated:

1. a varying combination of names, dates and places
2. all of the above!

Most of the respondents indicated that through experience, they had become accustomed to this means of searching. Those that chose the open response indicated that they felt that they used their preferred means of searching because it was easiest and

**Table 13: Searching Obituaries and Death Notices**

<b>Means of searching</b>	<b>Median score</b>
By name of the deceased	5.57/ 6
By names of survivors	3.21/ 6
By date of death	4.43/ 6
By place of death (address including city, county, and state)	3.50/ 6
By name of cemetery	2.21/ 6
By name of funeral home	2.07/ 6

insured accuracy. They stated:

1. Primary sources are more accurate, and allow the reader to see and make their own interpretation of the data and do follow-ups where appropriate.
2. Easiest way, in my experience
3. To make sure you are getting the correct person.

Local sources are usually not included in commercial databases such as Ancestry. The sources needed by genealogists are not neatly packaged, user-friendly, published materials. They are difficult to use because they were not created for genealogists. These historical documents originally served specific governmental or legal functions, so they usually do not have the access points designed to suit the information-seeking behavior of genealogists. They often lack indexes or a clear sense of organization.<sup>118</sup> What access points that exist are very limited. Some organizational methods work, but many do not. Some have indexes, but most do not. As a result, researchers may need extensive assistance in navigating through these records. The barriers to utilizing primary sources require information staff to spend additional time providing user instruction to researchers. It is not enough to simply provide a genealogy customer with a primary source; the librarian must also be prepared to explain its use and value.

**Table 14: Preferred Means of Searching Genealogical Records**

<b>Means of searching</b>	<b>Median score</b>
By names	10 / 14
By dates of events	0
By places where the events occurred	1 / 14
By browsing through unorganized records	1 / 14
Other	2 / 14

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<sup>118</sup> Gilmer, 23; Harvey, 14.

**Table 15: Reasons for Preferred Means of Searching**

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>Median score</b>
Accustomed to searching this way	10 / 14
Recommended method	1 / 14
Other	3 / 14

Having the records available in a library does not solve the genealogist's problems. Access to the record collection does not necessarily guarantee access to the information contained within the document. When records become genealogical records they require new arrangement and indexing to accommodate a new set of users. Access should mean more than simply owning materials and having them available for patrons to use. They should be able to retrieve desired information contained within the documents. In order to do this, the records must be reorganized to accommodate the needs of the user. These findings verify the results of the literature review and provide new insight. The survey provides definite indications of the needs and wants of experienced genealogists. Clearly, these researchers prefer to search by name, as previously suggested in reviewed literature. In fact, the survey suggests that they often want to search with more than one access point, not just the name of the person for whom the document was created.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion and Discussion**

### **5.1 Summary of Research Findings**

Genealogy continues to interest many current and potential library users. The researcher wrote this thesis to determine how librarians can best serve genealogists. In doing so, the researcher reviewed literature on the topic and conducted a survey of experienced genealogists to provide answers to the research questions posed in chapter 1:

- *What are the goals of genealogists?*

Genealogists want information to establish lineage. They trace their ancestry beginning with a parent and glean information from various sources to identify each subsequent ancestor. They work to discover or verify facts needed to prove family lineages. In addition, they also look for everyday details about how individuals lived in the past in order to create a family history.

- *How do genealogists learn methodology?*

Beginning genealogists usually start their search for their ancestry without a firm grasp of the work required to accomplish the task. They have little or no knowledge of sources, how to use them, and how to determine the quality of information gleaned from historical documents. Most learn on their own with assistance primarily from librarians. They become “experienced” as they gain familiarity with sources and research methods.

- *What do genealogists expect from libraries?*

Research usually begins at home, but the local public library serves as the starting point for more in-depth research.<sup>119</sup> The survey results indicate that genealogists tend to use

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<sup>119</sup> National Genealogical Society, *Suggestions for Beginners: Climbing Your Family Tree* (Arlington VA, NGS, 2005): <http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/edugetstart.cfm> (accessed 7 October 2006); Desmond Walls

libraries more frequently than archives, courthouses, and even online sources.

Genealogists have a history of looking to libraries for assistance in research. They expect the availability of information and assistance in using it. Many information professionals now recognize the importance of genealogy customers and strive to accommodate them.

- *How do genealogists search for information?*

The results of the survey indicate that most genealogists prefer to search by name over dates, places, or browsing through records. These results verify the findings of the literature review. Harvey states that one should keep in mind how genealogists search for information and arrange materials so that they can be searched by time, place, and most importantly, by name.<sup>120</sup> Duff and Johnson agree that genealogists, at least in the early stages of research, search primarily by name.<sup>121</sup>

- *What difficulties do genealogists face?*

The experienced genealogists surveyed find local vital records nearly as difficult to locate and use as the federal records. Most will look for an easier source to use when faced with using a large record collection without an index or archival finding aid. Records in their final life-cycle stages often move to an archive where they are organized by provenance, creators, time, and/or place. This method of arrangement may help historians, but not genealogists. Duff and Johnson agree. They found among the genealogists surveyed in their study that most found that [archival] finding aids were not especially useful.<sup>122</sup> In order to use these materials, genealogists must re-frame their questions to suit the

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Allen and Carolyn Earle Billingsley, *Using Libraries and Archives* (Conway, AR: Arkansas Research, 1997): <http://www.arkansasresearch.com/g-lib.html> (accessed 7 October 2006).

<sup>120</sup> Harvey, 13.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 84-85.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 91.

organizational methods of the archives. Unfortunately, the genealogist may not have enough information about an individual to specify an exact time or location.<sup>123</sup>

## **5.2 What can librarians do to make primary sources more accessible and usable for genealogists?**

Genealogical research requires access to a wide variety of sources, as well as early, if not immediate, access to primary sources. Whereas in many other subject fields, secondary sources can satisfy most information needs, the majority of genealogists find little ready-made material suitable for their information needs. Therefore, genealogists must research primary sources, including original manuscripts and/or their facsimiles.<sup>124</sup> Genealogists expect libraries to provide access to primary sources. They want to use name searches to locate desired information within these materials. Ultimately, the genealogist normally wants to gain enough genealogical information to construct a family history, a detailed narrative of the lives of his or her ancestors. Unfortunately, genealogists often find primary sources difficult to use because of their lack of indexing and user-friendly organization. Librarians can make primary sources more accessible and useable for genealogists by reorganizing and providing name indexes for these materials.

Librarians, who normally rely on published materials in collection development, often face users who need materials unavailable from commercial publishers. Of course, genealogical publishing companies such as *Ancestry* specialize in reproducing many primary sources such as census and military records on microfilm, but they do not provide copies of everything of genealogical value available. Many records remain untapped in local repositories such as county courthouses or businesses where they

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Harvey, 9.

remain unorganized, difficult to access, and often in poor condition. Faced with this situation, librarians can either depend on published materials and make referrals to those local repositories whenever possible, or try to acquire their community's historical documents and make them accessible for genealogists.

Opting to build an accessible collection of primary sources requires some consideration of the needs of genealogists and the records used in their research. Genealogists seek information to discover lineage. They need evidence from original, unaltered primary sources, and they expect to make rapid searches for pertinent information contained within these records. Physical record collections do not allow the luxury of keyword searches, so access depends on representation. Successful representation depends on understanding what information the user considers relevant within the historical document and creating the appropriate access points to find it.

The documents originally related to a specific event or organization function, such as a record of court proceedings, the death of an individual, or possibly the payment of property taxes. They may contain many pieces of information, some more important to the original function and purpose of the document than others. Still, the less relevant information continues to exist within the information package. Over time, the balance of importance can change and what was once incidental becomes more relevant. The physical text remains the same, but different aspects of the information contained come to the forefront of importance for the genealogists who now use the records. Incidental facts that accompanied the recording of once noteworthy events now take precedence over that which made the creation of the document necessary in the first place. Sorting the details of making sure family members received fair shares of an estate are less important now



than clues left in the document that clarify family kinship. Cause of death recorded on a death certificate is no longer as important as the names given of the dead man's parents. The payment of taxes on a property that changed hands many years ago holds little value now, but proving that a family was at a certain place at a certain time is important to the genealogist needing to distinguish one family from another with the same name in a different place.

The record's previous method of organization becomes obsolete as the balance of importance changes. The user needs information contained within the document, but not the same information the original indexer anticipated. A successful information retrieval system, whether electronic or physical, should focus on the user's problem. According to Doug Raber, "the system must be made to adapt to the person, rather than the other way around."<sup>125</sup> Therefore, in addition to acquiring local records, librarians must establish the means for users to access relevant information contained within each document.

Access points should reflect how the user searches for information. The previous literature review and survey indicate certain consistencies in what sources genealogists use and the way they search for information. Typically, genealogists research a family's lineage beginning with the present and works to discover the identity of each subsequent generation of ancestors. The genealogists' tools consist of historical documents containing relevant evidence of the identities and kinship of ancestors. They search these records using what information they already have. They may use place names or dates, but more frequently, they search by names of individuals or by surnames. The study

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<sup>125</sup> Douglas Raber, *The Problem of Information: An Introduction to Information Science* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2003), 168.

indicates that the most useful indexes allow name searches. These allow the genealogist to search through records quickly for information about individuals in the past.

Patrons, now more than ever before, expect easy access to information within records. Experiences using the Internet, specifically search engines offered by Google, E-Bay, and Amazon have played a part in influencing library patrons' desire for instant access to information. Google radically changed users' expectations and redefined the experience of those seeking information. Many searchers now expect quick and easy search process even at the expense of quality of results. The search engine's popularity comes from its simple keyword search. It allows the user to select the terms from knowledge he or she has about the topic of interest in order to get more information about it.<sup>126</sup> As a result, library users expect more than the ability to just access materials; they want to locate relevant information quickly. Raber wrote: "More often than not a seeker of information wants to retrieve particular information related to a problem to be solved, rather than simply retrieve a text on a topic."<sup>127</sup>

Record keepers did not organize their records with the genealogists in mind, so accessibility to the physical document does not necessarily guarantee genealogists the means to glean the desired information from them. These historical records originally served specific governmental or legal functions, so they usually do not have the access points designed to suit genealogists. They often lack indexes or a clear sense of organization, and as a result, researchers may need extensive assistance in working with these records. Librarians should take steps to insure the usability of primary sources in

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<sup>126</sup> Judy Luther, "Trumping Google? Metasearching's Promise," *Library Journal* 128 (1 October 2003): 36.

<sup>127</sup> Raber, 22.

order to satisfy the patron's need for information, as well as streamline the information retrieval process.

The History/Social Sciences Department of the Memphis (TN) Public Library and Information Center Provides an excellent example of librarians recognizing and meeting the needs of genealogists, as well as assisting other repositories with the challenge of indexing historical documents. Department manager Dr. James R. Johnson increased microfilm holdings of local records from seven reels to over six-hundred during the 1980s. Staff uncovered these records in the local archives, organized them, and sent them to the Tennessee State Library and Archives where they were microfilmed. TSLA returned the original records to Memphis along with microfilm copies. Johnson then led an ambitious project to index these records specifically with genealogists in mind.<sup>128</sup>

Johnson did not stop with archived materials; he approached outside agencies and businesses to gain access to their records. He approached the local health department to index vital records. Johnson borrowed local marriage, death, and birth records considered public records because of their age. The library staff created name indexes of these records specifically for genealogists. Johnson then returned the newly organized records to the health department with copies of the indexes. In addition, he approached non-governmental agencies such as funeral homes and cemeteries to gain access to their records. These businesses either gave or loaned original records to the library where they were organized and indexed. In return, Johnson gave copies of the indexes to the businesses to help them keep better track of their records.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Dr. James R. Johnson, telephone interview by author, 20 June 2007, Memphis (TN) Public Library and Information Center.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

### **5.3 Further Research**

Making collections useable for genealogists requires analysis of user needs and methods of research. In doing so, we see that the use of names provides the most acceptable access points for indexes. These new indexes satisfy user's want of rapid search capabilities and the need to view essential primary sources, but their value does not end there. In addition, preserving and making accessible a community's historic records allows libraries to contribute to local history. Creating a useable collection of genealogy sources presents the library with the opportunity to document its community's uniqueness while satisfying its customer's desire to find his or her place in it.

Librarians need to index local primary sources to allow genealogists better access to the information contained within these historical documents. We understand the goals and methods of genealogists and how to present the needed materials. Of course, further examinations of how to acquire local records will help complete the picture. We need a better understanding of how libraries can partner with other local agencies with historical records in order to make these documents available and useable for genealogists.

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## APPENDIX

## Questionnaire

I hope that you will participate in this study of how experienced genealogists use primary sources in their research. The study is intended to provide librarians serving genealogists with the knowledge needed to improve reference services for those interested in genealogy and family history. The study focuses primarily on discovering how librarians should arrange and index genealogical records to best suite your needs as a genealogist.

Participation involves completing a short questionnaire at your convenience. For most participants, completing the questionnaire will take less than twenty minutes. Questions focus on your priorities and preferences in searching for genealogical information.

Participation in this study should not cause any discomfort. However, you may choose to stop to stop at any time [including after you have completed the questionnaire]. In addition, you may skip any questions if you feel uncomfortable with them. However, you should find the questionnaire relevant and interesting.

Your responses to the question will be kept in strict confidence and maintained anonymously so that your responses will not be linked to you. Your name will not be used in any report about this project. Data from this study will be used in an academic thesis and may be used in published articles. When the study is completed, a general summary of the results will be sent to you.

You may address questions or comments to the Primary Investigator, Patrick O'Daniel, at podaniel@utk.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can contact the UT Office of Research Compliance officer at blawson@utk.edu.

I appreciate your participation in this project and hope that the experience is interesting and informative.

### *Key terms*

**Primary source** – original documented evidence based on firsthand knowledge of an eyewitness or participant in an event. Examples: marriage certificate, death record, or probate record

**Secondary source** – a work derived from a primary source whose creator was removed from the event in question. Examples: a published family history book, family tradition, or an article in a genealogy magazine

**Consent Statement:** I am 18 years old or older, and I have read and understand the above statement of the nature and purpose of the Genealogy Research study and agree to participate. If the answer is “yes,” please click “next” to begin the questionnaire.

1) How would you rate the importance of using primary sources as tools in genealogical research? [please check one]

- ☐ Very Important
- ☐ Somewhat important
- ☐ Useful, but not necessary
- ☐ Unimportant

2) What is the most difficult part of using primary sources? [please check one]

- ☐ Finding the right source to use
- ☐ Finding what library, archives, or court house owns the materials you need
- ☐ Traveling to the location where the records are kept
- ☐ Finding information in the records once you arrive
- ☐ All are equally difficult
- ☐ Other (Please Specify):

3) What do you find are the most difficult primary sources to locate and use? Please rank the following: easiest = 1; most difficult = 4.

Census (US Federal 1790-1930)	<input type="text"/>
Social Security applications	<input type="text"/>
Military (pre-World War II service and pension records)	<input type="text"/>
Local vital records (including birth, death, marriage, tax, land, and court records)	<input type="text"/>

4) [Optional] Are there other genealogical records have you found difficult to locate and use? Please specify:

5) If a large record collection (more than 10 reels of microfilm or more than 20 books) does not have an index or finding aid, what would you usually do? [please check one]

- ☐ Will you look for an easier source to use?
- ☐ Will you use the collection anyway as time allows?
- ☐ Other (Please Specify):

6) What is the most helpful aid in using collections of primary sources for genealogical research? [please check one]

- ☐ Index (listing of names, dates, and/or places)
- ☐ Archival finding aid (listing of subjects within a manuscript collection)
- ☐ Other (Please Specify):

7) What do you think is the best way to search for birth records? Please rate the following methods of searching: 1 = worst, 5 = best.

- by name of child
- by name of mother
- by name of father
- by date of birth
- by place of birth

8) [optional] Is there another way you would prefer to search for birth records? Please specify:

9) How do you prefer to search for marriage records, including licenses, certificates, and bonds? Please rank the following methods of searching: 1 = worst; 5 = best.

- by names of brides and grooms
- by date of marriage
- by place of marriage
- by bondsman's name
- by name of Clergy or Justice of the Peace

10) [optional] Is there another way you would prefer to search for marriage records?  
Please specify:

11) How do you prefer to search for probate records? Please rank the following methods of searching: 1 = worst; 6 = best.

by name of the deceased	<input type="text"/>
by date of death	<input type="text"/>
by place of death (name of town, city, and/or county)	<input type="text"/>
by name of spouse	<input type="text"/>
by names of children	<input type="text"/>
by name of executor or administrator	<input type="text"/>

12) [optional] Is there another way you would prefer to search for probate records? Please specify:

13) How do you prefer to search for twentieth-century death records, including death certificates and funeral home records?  
Please rank the following methods of searching: 1 = worst; 5 = best.

by name of the deceased	<input type="text"/>
by date of death	<input type="text"/>
by place of death (specific address)	<input type="text"/>
by name of spouse	<input type="text"/>
by name of informant	<input type="text"/>

14) [optional] Is there another way you would prefer to search for death records? Please specify:



15) How do you prefer to search for tax records? Please rank the following methods of searching: 1 = worst; 3 = best.

by name of property owner

by place of residence

by date of the tax list

16) [optional] Is there another way you would prefer to search for tax records? Please specify:

17) How do you prefer to search for naturalization records, including first papers (declaration), affidavits, petitions, and oaths of allegiance? Please rank the following methods of searching: 1 = worst; 4 = best.

by name of immigrant

by date of document

by date of immigrant's arrival in U.S.

by location of court where the documents were filed

18) [optional] Is there another way you would prefer to search for naturalization records? Please specify:

19) How do you prefer to search for obituaries or death notices from newspapers? Please rank the following methods of searching: 1 = worst; 6 = best.

by name of deceased

by names of survivors

by date of death

by place of death (address including city, county, and state)

by name of cemetery

by name of funeral home

20) [optional] Is there another way you would prefer to search for obituaries and death notices? Please specify:

21) In general, how do you search for genealogical records? Please choose one of the following:

- ☐ by names
- ☐ by dates of events
- ☐ by places where the events occurred
- ☐ by browsing through unorganized records
- ☐ other (please specify)

22) Referring to question 14, why do you prefer to search primary sources for genealogical information in this way? [please choose one]

- ☐ This is how you are accustomed to searching.
- ☐ This method has been recommended by others.
- ☐ Other (Please Specify):

23) How long have you been doing genealogical research? [please check one]

- ☐ Five years or less
- ☐ Five to ten years
- ☐ Ten years or more

23) How long have you been doing genealogical research? [please check one]

- ☐ Five years or less
- ☐ Five to ten years
- ☐ Ten years or more

24) How did you learn to do genealogy? [check all that apply]

- ☐ Self-taught: I learned along the way through trial and error
- ☐ Self-taught: I studied the methodology before I started research
- ☐ I took a class or classes
- ☐ Other (Please Specify):

25) Where do you do most of your research?

Please rate the following: 1 = least used, 4 = most frequently used.

Archives

Libraries

Courthouses

Online

26) [optional] Where else do you research genealogy? Please specify.

## VITA

Patrick O'Daniel has been with the Memphis Public Library & Information Center since 1991 and is currently a Librarian/Specialist (Genealogy) with the History/Social Sciences Department. He has a Master's Degree in History from the University of Memphis, he studied at the Institute of Genealogy and Historical Research at Samford University, and he completed the requirements for Master of Science degree from the University of Tennessee in September 2007.

The author has presented programs on creating local history and genealogy collections for public libraries at the Public Library Association Conference in Phoenix, Arizona in March 2002 and at the Tennessee Library Association Conference in Chattanooga, Tennessee in March 2003.

He has also written a number of articles including: "The Life and Career of Col. Robert Looney of Memphis, Tennessee" for *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* in 2002; "The Mid-South Flood Collection" for the *Tennessee Archivist* in 2006; and "Loyalty a Requisite: Trade and the Oath of Allegiance in the Mid-South in 1865" for *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* in 2007.

In 2006, he co-authored with Gina Cordell a photographic history of Memphis, Tennessee entitled *Historic Photos of Memphis* (Turner).